

Religion & Liberty

WINTER 2023

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF WOKEISM

BY BISHOP ROBERT BARRON |

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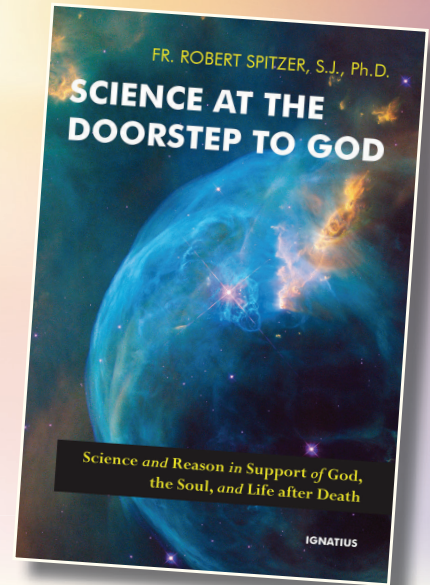
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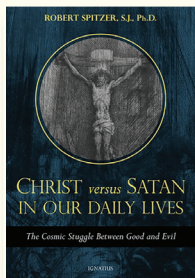


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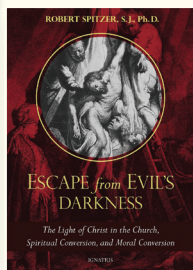
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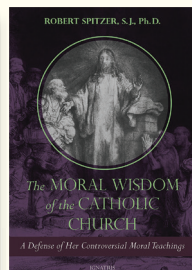
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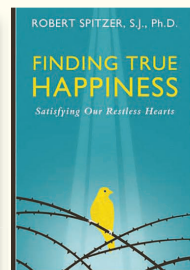
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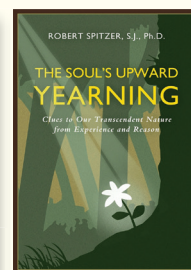
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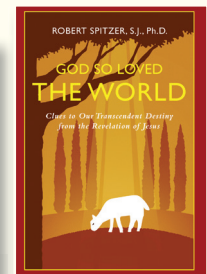
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THE ISSUE THIS TIME

BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

Walk into any bookstore (if you can find one), look for the “Religion” section (assuming it has one), and see what you see. Multiple translations of the Bible, some even signed by, if not the Author, then the Author’s inerrant interpreter. There’s Christian fiction, usually set in the 19th century and on a plain for some reason. Perhaps C.S. Lewis and Timothy Keller. More than a few celebrity pastors, like Francis Chan, Max Lucado, and John Piper. And of course a rich (emphasis on *rich*) menu of divinely inspired prophets, from Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen to the aptly named Creflo Dollar.

And of course, what comes under the rubric “Religion” is as expansive now as the U.S. deficit. The paranormal (that is, just left of normal), the Not-So-New New Age, astrology (still with us like an acne scar), even veganism all rate as forms of spirituality apparently supplanting the “hidebound dogmas” of organized religions. Titles such as *The Power of Now*, *The Power of Crystals*, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (sure is a lotta power in them thar skills) annoyingly abound. But then again, one person’s superstition is another person’s life hack.

But isn’t religion today as popular as a cable subscription? Aren’t the nones gaining on the somes? Current churchgoing trajectories look about as promising as early efforts by the Wright brothers. Yet, in the 19th century, up to 78% of Americans didn’t go to church. So maybe we’re living in the best of times.

Americans, being human after all, will always yearn for something beyond the quotidian that opens the doors of perception just a smidge wider. We want to *feel* our religion, too, experience it like young love or the hiccups. We want *results*. Fine doctrinal distinctions and confessional compunctions are for the theo-nerds. In religion, we’re all Missourians now: *show me*.

The pursuit of the perennial would appear a quixotic one in this day of AI mimicry and pervasive disinformation. “What is truth?” asked Pontius Pilate, anticipating both “That’s just, like, your opinion, man” and “It is a context-dependent decision.” It’s the truth, however, that sets us free. To which David Foster Wallace added the gloss: “But not until it’s finished with you.” Indeed. Hardcore repristinators, like empires, have the tendency to strike back with visions of a purified Faith wedded to an obsequious state. If you think a woke republic is bad (as we will see), just wait.

We will never stop searching for our Creator, or His peace. To think otherwise is the stuff of sociologists and HBO but not of high drama (as we will also see). “Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee,” wrote St. Augustine a long time ago. Nothing’s changed, even as everything’s changed.

Our contributors to this issue of *Religion & Liberty* have much to say in this regard. They, too, see all the same threats to the permanent things that you and I do, but manage to provide some comfort nevertheless. Not everything’s up for grabs. Some things, like hope (and alas, even the Dude), abide.

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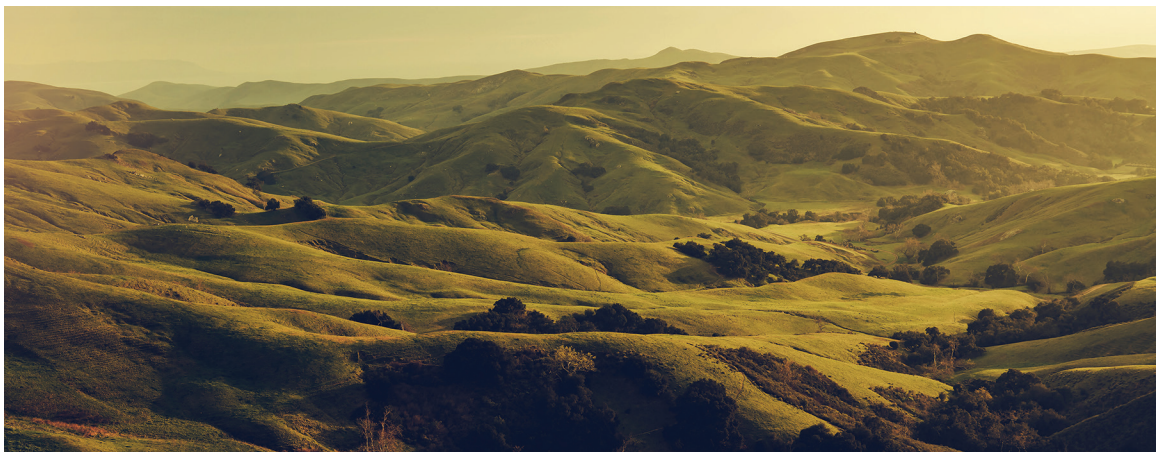
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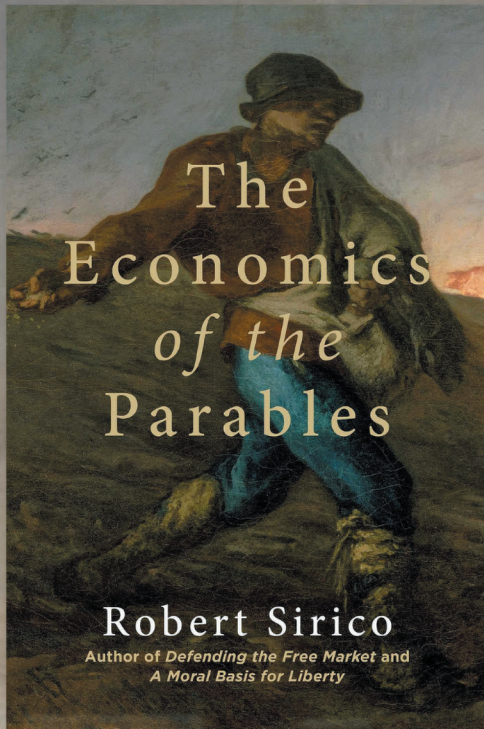
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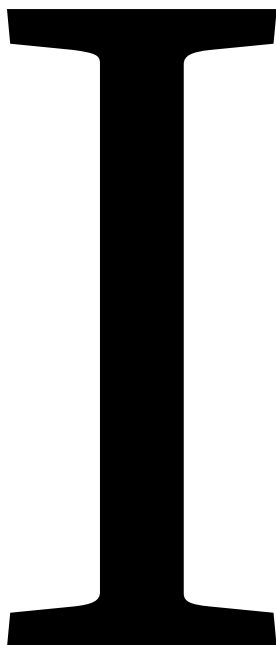
THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF WOKEISM

by BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

The word “woke” is heard a lot these days, but what does it mean? What are its roots? And what are its consequences for politics, religion, and the future of our culture? Bishop Robert Barron provides some much-needed insights.

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This essay is an edited transcript of Bishop Robert Barron's plenary lecture delivered at Acton University on June 21, 2023.



IT MIGHT BE ARGUED that the central preoccupation of the cultural conversation in the West today is “wokeism.” This system of thought and action has rather remarkably found its way into practically every nook and cranny of our political, economic, and cultural arenas, and it’s having a massively deleterious effect on our culture. One of our major political parties has largely organized itself around defending woke ideas and implementing woke strategies, and the other major party has begun to organize itself against the same.

There is much heat and energy around the conversation, but very often, I have found, people don’t



Portrait of René Descartes (1596–1650) by Frans Hals

know precisely what they’re talking about when they advocate or attack wokeism. My basic argument is that wokeism is hardly an ephemeral ideology that sprang spontaneously forth in the summer of 2020; rather, it has a long and clearly discernible intellectual pedigree. If we are to stand against it—as I do—we must do so in a sophisticated way, understanding where it came from.

If I might begin with a description more than a definition, I would say that wokeism is a popularization of critical theory. Critical theory, which I will endeavor to describe throughout this talk, is an intellectual movement that flourished in the mid-20th century, largely in the French and German academies. Some of the names associated with it include Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. It made its way, during the 1960s and 1970s, into the American academy. René Girard, though he would have been an opponent of wokeism, was involved in organizing a conference at Johns Hopkins in the late 1960s, when Derrida came over to these shores for the first time. Girard said it was the moment when French structuralism and postmodernism made its way into the American academy. There it gestated for several decades until it sprang forth as a bacillus into the wider bloodstream of the society during that summer of 2020.

In order even adequately to grasp this complex intellectual tradition, we would require at least two

or three semester courses, but I will try, in this brief presentation, to draw together five of the strands that make up critical theory, and in doing so persuade you that it functions as the intellectual matrix for wokeism. Then I would like to suggest how Catholic Social Teaching stands dramatically athwart the assumptions behind wokeism. My hope is that this exercise will enable us better to engage, both intellectually and practically, this dangerous movement.

THE RADICALIZATION OF THE MODERN SELF

The first quality of critical theory is what I will call a radicalization of the modern sense of the self. The two most important players among the modern philosophers are René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, both of whom effect a sort of Copernican revolution in regard to the subject and object. If you want to see the place where modernity was born, you can find it in the German city of Ulm, where Descartes, then serving as a soldier in the Bavarian army, retreated

to a heated room in a search for the foundations of philosophy. There he came up with the famous *Cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am." I can doubt tradition, religion, and even sense experience, but the one thing I cannot doubt is that I'm doubting.

Notice that Descartes recommends that the whole of objectivity be brought before the bar of subjectivity for adjudication, since the one absolutely certain truth is the cogito. On this basis, he makes a sharp demarcation between what he calls *res extensae* and *res cogitantes*—that is to say, "extended things" out in the world and "thinking things" on the inside. The radical division between body and soul is bequeathed to modernity as a typical anthropology.

Kant, the second figure, famously argues in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that the great organizing categories of traditional philosophy—time, space, causality, identity, etc.—are not actually in the world but rather in the mind as *a priori* structures. Therefore, the mind does not revolve around reality; rather, reality, as it were, revolves around the mind.

We find something very similar in Kant's account of the moral life. The only thing that can be called good in an unrestricted sense, he says, is a good will. Kant privileges the interior over the exterior: I do not look to my acts in the world to determine what is right or wrong; rather, it is the will, governed by the categorical imperative discovered at the root of its own existence, that determines moral rectitude or turpitude.

Now, these philosophical moves in both Descartes and Kant, which place the real self in the deep, hidden center of one's identity, over and against the body, have their roots in ancient gnosticism, which in a very similar way privileged the inside over the outside. Read Cyril O'Regan on this point. But the postmoderns and critical theorists, I would argue, radicalize this modern sense of the self effected by Descartes and Kant, giving the hidden, interior, "true" self complete dominance over the body.

This viewpoint came to perhaps fullest expression in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, which he defined as the primacy of existence over essence. In Sartre's terms, this means that freedom precedes and determines meaning and purpose. Who I am is a function not of certain objective givens but rather of my sovereign choice.

If you don't see the influence of this revolution in the rhetoric today regarding gender identity, you are not paying attention. Time and again, we are told that the "real me" can be something other than the body that I carry around, and that the former can exercise

The title page of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)



“

IN SARTRE’S TERMS, WHO I AM IS A FUNCTION NOT OF CERTAIN OBJECTIVE GIVENS BUT RATHER OF MY SOVEREIGN CHOICE.

”

a sovereignty over the latter. Though gender fluidity was not a thing in Sartre’s time, it follows neatly from his philosophy of the radicalized modern self, the privileging of the interior over the exterior. And instead of Descartes’ *cogito* or Kant’s *a priori* ideas, the postmoderns insist that cultural prejudices, pre-existing in our minds, inevitably color our perception of reality.

Opposing this, of course, is the biblical and classical idea of the true self as a union of body and soul. The insistence of my intellectual hero, St. Thomas Aquinas, that the soul is the “form” of the body is telling in this context, for it assumes that the soul does not have a manipulative sovereignty over the body. It includes the body, animates the body, makes the body what it is. Thomas specifies that the “soul is in the body, not as contained by it, but as containing it.” Therefore, this dichotomization between the “real me” in here and the body out there simply doesn’t work. This terribly erroneous anthropology is now taken for granted, and we have to stand athwart it.



THE RELATIVIZATION OF TRUTH

A second principal mark of postmodernism and critical theory is a profound skepticism in regard to truth claims. An argument against this position goes back to Plato and Augustine: Whenever you take a radically skeptical position, are you also skeptical about your own theorizing? The irony is that those advocating a relativization of truth do indeed think their own theory is true!

In this skepticism, critical theory stands as much against the Enlightenment as it does against classicism. Taking a cue from Nietzsche’s perspectivism, the critical theorists argue that we never get a grasp of the way things are but only of our limited perspective on them. They consistently pull the curtain back on claims to objective truth and see behind them plays of power. If there is only your truth and my truth, then “truth” is in fact a weapon used by powerful people to maintain their privileges.

The inspiration for much of this is in the theorizing of the patron saint of critical theory: Jacques Derrida. His densely complex texts are famously unreadable, but they function as a sort of scripture for postmodernism. Derrida is most famous for what he calls the “deconstructionist” approach to the logocentric tradition of classical philosophy in the West. From the time of the ancients, we had a conviction that *logos*—language, words—could get us in touch with truth, with reality as it is. Think here of Aquinas, who argued for a correspondence of mind to reality mediated by language. Words give us access to the way things are.

Derrida deconstructs that approach, speculating that “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”: “There is nothing outside the text.” Rather, what you have is an endless play of what he calls *différance*. Words refer only to other words, and I stay permanently within the context of the text, where meaning is always deferred. Hence his famous play on words: *différance*, the difference of words, leads to *différance*, the deferral of meaning. I never know what things really are, and truth is always open-ended. Does this sound familiar? What was once sort of whispered in the *recherché* heights of the French academy has come now to be the default position of most young people today.

I once heard Derrida at a conference where someone asked him, “How would you define deconstruction?” He answered in his French that deconstruction means “*Viens, oui, oui*”: “Come, yes, yes.” What he means is the permanent openness to something new,

some fresh configuration of meaning. This sounds positive, but the shadow side, of course, is that there is no final truth, no ultimate settling of a question. There is always something new that can come, some new way of configuring a text. Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What gender am I? “*Viens, oui, oui*. Think about it in a fresh way. Don’t be tied to old perspectives. Be open.”

In its comically absurd form, this becomes the distinctively woke idea that even math and science are expressions of white supremacy or exclusion of the powerless. Even basic mathematical statements like two plus two is equivalent to four are epistemic oppression. To insist that one follow the scientific method is just a play of power and the imposition of one way of knowing. You can never say that something is true.

AN ANTAGONISTIC SOCIAL THEORY

A third quality of critical theory and therefore of wokeism is a fundamentally antagonistic theory of social relations. The critical theorists get this idea from Karl Marx, whose influence can be seen all over critical theory and, at least implicitly, wokeism. Marx takes Hegel’s dialectical understanding of history—thesis and antithesis converge in a synthesis in the ongoing development of Absolute Spirit—and turns it on its head with his dialectical materialism. Marx opined that the social world is divided into oppressors and oppressed. On his reading, this always came down to economic oppressors and oppressed, those who control the means of production and those who are exploited by this control. He also takes from Hegel—and this is very influential in the present-day conversation—the category of the master-slave relationship. Thus, history is the endless antagonistic conflict of warring groups: the domineering and the dominated, the masters and the slaves.

The point of Marxist philosophy is to foment the class struggle that would lead to the overthrow of the system and the liberation of the oppressed. In his theses on Feuerbach, Marx wrote, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point is to change it.” This adage was enthusiastically adopted by all of the critical theorists; in fact, it is what makes their theory “critical.” The purpose of their philosophizing is to bring about the Communist revolution by prompting a violent conflict between the slaves and their masters, the haves and the have-nots.



An East German banknote featuring Marx’s likeness (1975)

A major development of this doctrine, undertaken by the critical theorists, is that the categories of oppressor and oppressed were expanded beyond the merely economic. They began to see colonial oppression, sexual oppression, racial oppression, gender oppression, etc., and these have been even more enthusiastically expanded by woke activists today. But the same dynamic holds: the binary of master and slave, oppressor and oppressed.

An exceptionally interesting connection in this context is Derrida’s insistence that certain binaries haunt our linguistic system. Our language, he argues, does tend to favor fundamental divisions: male/female, straight/queer, Western/non-Western, civilized/uncivilized, white/black, etc. We tend to generate meaning by playing these binaries off one another; indeed, meaning is often a function of the dominance of one side of the pair over the other. So, “male, straight, civilized, and white” rules over “female, queer, non-Western, and uncivilized.” It is almost like a computer language: on or off, one or zero. Can you see how so much of the woke rhetoric today follows from this? Woke theorists want to privilege the underside of these classic binary oppositions.

And much of the strategy, Marxist in form, remains the same: the encouragement of conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed for the sake of radical social revolution. Everyone in the society has to fall on one side or the other of this divide; there is no third option or blending of the two, and a social theory predicated upon cooperation necessarily serves the interests of the oppressors.

SUBSTRUCTURE/SUPERSTRUCTURE

Marx is certainly one of the strongest influences on critical theory, and wokeism has often been described as a form of cultural Marxism. We have already seen this in relation to the antagonistic social theory, but I would also draw attention to Marx's doctrine of substructure and superstructure, which has proven massively influential today. I was especially struck in the summer of 2020 by this, because I heard it all the time in the rhetoric of the woke activists.

Marx was fundamentally reductionist in his thinking. At bottom, all of social life is predicated upon economic struggle. At the heart of every society is the manner in which it organizes its economic life. Hence, the ancient world was a slave economy, the medieval world was a feudal economy, and the modern world is a capitalist economy. This is the core of society, its substructure.

But this single economic form throws up around itself a protective shell, which consists of practically everything else in the society. The sole purpose of this massively complex superstructure is to protect the substructure. Thus, for Marx, the capitalist system protects itself through politics: what politicians are interested in, finally, is defending the substructure. It protects itself through the military: every war that is fought is, fundamentally, an economic struggle. It protects itself through the arts, which are patronized by the wealthy and therefore tend to support the wealth-generating quality of the economy. Most famously for Marx, it protects itself through religion,

which is the opium of the masses, drugging us into an insensibility that keeps us from realizing the pain produced by our oppressive economic system. What's the point of someone like me? Why are priests fostered by a civil society? Because we are the drug dealers; our whole purpose is to calm people down and protect the economic substructure. Politics, the military, the arts, religion—all of it is simply part of the superstructural defense mechanism.

Critical theory took this on, but they expanded it beyond economic oppression. They commenced to speculate whether race or colonial empire or gender relations stood at the center of civil society, and therefore to wonder how everything else in the culture served to protect that precious substructure. Can you see this practically everywhere in wokeism? Once we see this Marxist framework, we can understand "The 1619 Project," which is a good example of this quality. The claim being made by its advocates is that something like slavery and the defense of the slave economy stands at the very heart of the American project, and that everything else is subordinated to it. It reads all of society through that very particular lens.

I thought of this often during the terrible summer of 2020, when there were these almost manic attempts to tear down all of the major institutions of our society, from the judicial system to the federal government. Most famously, there was an effort to "defund the police." This is all part of a Marxist analysis: these things exist simply to protect a form of oppression, and we should get rid of them.

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POWER AS THE SUPREME CATEGORY

Lastly, critical theory, and therefore wokeism, sees power as the supreme category. The theme of power is a fascinating one in the history of philosophy, and the classical theologians speculated quite a bit about God's power. The Thomist tradition represents the sane idea that God is all-powerful but also simple. God's power, which is indeed infinite, is therefore not separate from or at odds with his being, his goodness, his justice, and his other perfections. All the divine attributes and qualities are finally one.

This may sound very abstract, but there is a very interesting upshot to this: it prevents God's power from becoming arbitrary and absolute. Could God, in his infinite power, make it the case that two plus two equals five? If he's infinitely powerful, why not? Could God, in his infinite power, make adultery a

virtue? If he has declared adultery to be bad, couldn't he declare it to be good instead?

Thomas' answer is no, because you would drive a wedge thereby between God's power and God's manner of being. He strenuously argued that it is no restriction of God's power to say that he can't do the impossible, like make two plus two equal to five, because two plus two being equal to four is simply a participation in the truth that God is. It is also no limitation on God's power to say that he can't do the immoral, like make adultery a virtue, because that would be at odds with his own goodness. God cannot embrace either falsehood or sin because it would be repugnant to his own manner of being.

But there was an alternative viewpoint in the late medieval and early modern periods, referred to typically as "voluntarism"—from the Latin *voluntas*, meaning "will"—which put an enormous stress on the primacy of God's will. The result was that God's will was effectively divorced from his being, and his *potentia absoluta*, his absolute power, became the arbitrary determinant of truth and value. Hence, certain acts are morally wrong because God said so, and certain claims are true or false because God so determined. Descartes goes so far as to say that, if God wanted, two plus two might be equal to five. The voluntaristic God, in a departure from Aquinas, has a power that can overrule and redefine reality.

This voluntarism in regard to God in late medieval and early modern philosophy was transposed to the human order during the modern period, where power again becomes hyper-emphasized. One thinks of William of Ockham's definition of freedom as a sovereign hovering above the yes and the no; of Schopenhauer's "world as will"; and, most obviously, of Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power." If God is dead, where does the *potentia absoluta* go? It goes to us. Our will to power, unlimited by any constraint provided by objective value, is analogous to the power of the voluntaristic God. And all of this comes to full expression in Sartre's existentialism, according to which an individual in his freedom has a godlike mastery over good and evil.

The voluntaristic God thus morphs into the voluntaristic, all-creating, all-defining self: I can decide on the basis of my absolute freedom the nature of reality; don't tell me what to do, and don't tell me who I am. Does that sound familiar? In *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, the infamous 1992 decision of the United States Supreme Court in an abortion case, the justices said, "At the heart of liberty is the right



A defaced statue of the Goddess of Masonry following the George Floyd protests

to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." Is that all? Here again is the transplanting of the *potentia absoluta* of God now into the *potentia absoluta* of the self.

Much of this came together in the thought of Michel Foucault, who is, along with Derrida, arguably the most influential of the postmoderns. When I commenced my doctoral studies in Paris in 1989, just five years after Foucault's death, the philosopher's owlish face looked out from every bookstore window in the city. He was the dominant philosophical figure; it was simply impossible to avoid him.



Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault demonstrating in Paris (1971)

At the center of his project was what he called an act of intellectual archeology, digging under the surface of various social practices today to find their often contradictory antecedents. Thus, he looked at questions of madness and sanity, the manner in which we punish criminals, human sexuality—and he found that at different times, these themes were treated very differently indeed. This led him to set aside claims to objective truth and value and to look, as we have seen, for the power relationships that obtained and the strategies of language and coercion employed by powerful people to maintain their power.

When we listen to the wokeist theorists today, the capacity for self-invention is rampant, and games of oppression are everywhere. It is, finally, all about power. It is Michel Foucault for the masses.

WOKEISM AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

If I've presented even a relatively adequate account of wokeism, I think you can see, clearly enough, that this ideology stands very much athwart Catholic Social Teaching. First, our social teaching would assume that each person is indeed a subject of infinite

dignity, but not the creator of value. To say, in line with critical theory, that the sovereign self invents value—this is supremely dangerous talk. Catholic Social Teaching, it seems to me, stands athwart the value-generating self. Instead, the heart of its social theory is love. Each person is called to love, and love, as Thomas Aquinas said, is not a feeling but rather an act of the will: it is to will the good of the other.

Relatedly, Catholic Social Teaching does not hold to the relativization of truth or a Derridean permanent postponement of meaning and knowledge. Rather, it affirms the objectivity of values, both epistemic and moral, which can be known by the inquiring mind. If we are inventing value for ourselves and vaguely tolerating each other, then we cannot truly love each other. Love has to display itself, as it were, against the background of a hierarchy of objective values, and each person must situate himself in relation to that hierarchy. Otherwise, without a keen sense of the objective good, I don't know what to will for you.

Thirdly, Catholic Social Teaching does not advocate an antagonistic understanding of social reality in the Marxist manner. Rather, it posits a cooperative view according to which classes and individuals and institutions subsist coinherently and in a mutually

corrective manner. Individuals, social classes, and owners and workers all cooperate with one another. Seeing society in antagonistic terms and fomenting violence has no place in Catholic Social Teaching.

Fourthly, Catholic Social Teaching does not resolve the dilemma of the one and the many in the Marxist manner, holding to a substructure-superstructure framework. This reading of society is hopelessly simplistic and dangerous, reducing everything other than the substructure to a problem to be unmasked or undone. Rather, Catholic Social Teaching sees society as a complex web of individuals and institutions subsisting in mutuality. It doesn't all come down to economics or politics or culture; rather, all of these coinhere. In fact, whenever you say, "It all comes down to [fill in the blank]," you are wrong. Society is complex, and beautiful for that very reason.

French propaganda poster from 1793



Finally, Catholic Social Teaching decidedly does not hold to the primacy of power as the supreme value in the quasi-voluntarist way. Rather, it sees justice and love—which is to say, rendering to each his due and willing the good of the other—as supreme. They are both values *in se*, valuable in themselves. Could you ever imagine it would be right to do something unjust? Would it ever be right not to be loving? No, of course not, because justice and love are absolute values. The language that Catholic Social Teaching tends to use to express both of these ideas is subsidiarity and solidarity. Power is a dynamic, obviously, within any sort of social arrangement, but it is subordinated to the moral values that it serves.

But the values often held to be absolute today—like diversity, equity, and inclusion—are values *secundum quid*, as the medievals would say. They're values depending on circumstances, values as far as they go. They are not absolute. However "inclusive" a university may be, for example, students are *excluded* from the admissions process to be included in that community. The point is that inclusivity is a good thing *secundum quid*—and the same is true of equity and diversity. These three values are like the triplet that came out of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Those, too, were values *secundum quid*. When you try to make secondary values primary values, you lead your nation by a short route to chaos.

If we want to engage wokeism in an intellectually serious way—and, mind you, the theorists of the movement do not want you to do that, but rather want to keep the discussion on emotional grounds—it's important for us to understand not only where it came from, but also how strongly Catholic Social Teaching stands athwart it. **RL**

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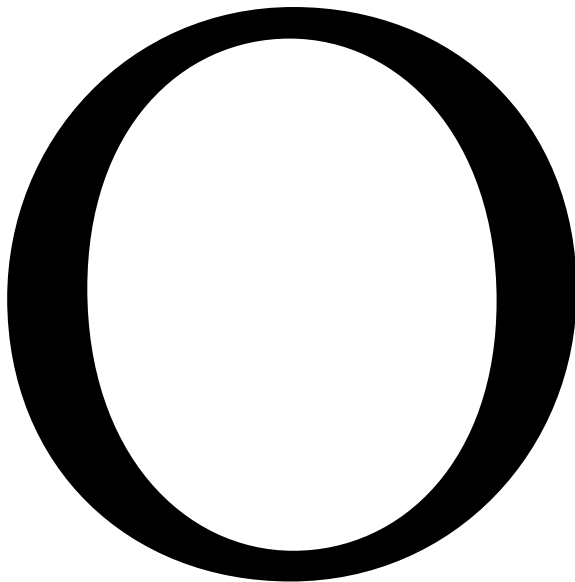


JOHN WITHERSPOON: EDUCATING FOR LIBERTY

by **GEORGE H. NASH**

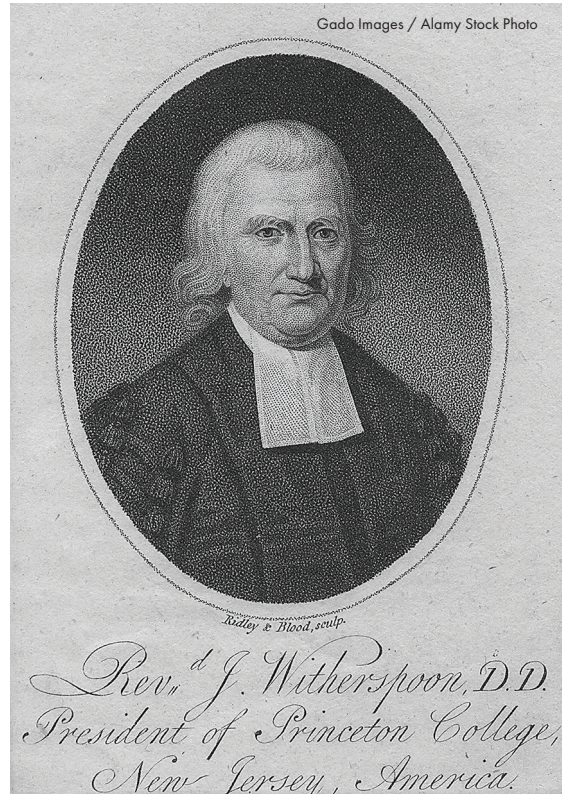
If the American Revolution could be justly called a “Presbyterian rebellion,” one Presbyterian minister in particular was its general. His influence on the founding, and education, of this nation has remained underappreciated for too long.

Statue of John Witherspoon at Princeton University's East Pyne Building; photo by Undersea Oleg Kovtun / Alamy Stock Photo



ON THE CAMPUS of Princeton University, near the chapel and the Firestone Library, there is a statue of the college's president during the American Revolution, John Witherspoon. Outside a few corners of academia, Witherspoon is little remembered anymore. Few Americans know that he was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Even among scholars, he has largely fallen into the faceless category of "Forgotten Founders" of our republic. Far better known, in 2023, is the actress Reese Witherspoon, who claims to be his descendant.

Yet in his lifetime, and for at least a century thereafter, Witherspoon was widely esteemed as (in one



Engraved portrait of John Witherspoon (1775)

writer's words) "one of the great men of the age and the world." More recently, a small but growing number of historians has concluded that he was probably "the most influential teacher in the entire history of American higher education" and the most important college president America has ever known. It seems not too much to say that, were it not for Witherspoon, American politics in the 1770s and 1780s might have taken a different trajectory.

In this essay I wish briefly to explore Witherspoon's impact on America's founding generation and the cause for which they fought. He was born in Scotland in 1723, educated at the University of Edinburgh, and ordained into the Presbyterian ministry a few years later. From his early 20s until his mid-40s, he served with increasing distinction as a minister in the Church of Scotland.

During these two decades, Scottish Presbyterians were divided into two contentious factions: urbane and theologically liberal Moderates on the one side, and strict Calvinists, known as the Popular party, on the other. In the protracted contest for control of the national church, Witherspoon became a leader of the

Popular party. In 1753 he anonymously published a mordant satire of his opponents in a tract entitled *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. Although Witherspoon and his allies eventually lost their battle with the Moderates, his bestselling *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* and subsequent writings solidified his reputation as a champion of Christian orthodoxy and brought him to the notice of Presbyterians in the American colonies.

Thus it came to pass that in 1766 the trustees of the little College of New Jersey invited him to become its next president. The college had been founded in 1746 by evangelical, New Side Presbyterians during the ecclesiastical strife unleashed by the Great Awakening. Although the school was officially non-denominational, most of its trustees were Presbyterian. Anxious now to keep their struggling citadel of orthodoxy afloat, and to fend off machinations by anti-evangelical, Old Side Presbyterians to capture it, the trustees turned to Scotland and to Witherspoon. Not only was he an uncompromising Calvinist, a masterful sermonizer, and a learned graduate of the prestigious University of Edinburgh, as an outsider to ecclesiastical politics in the colonies, he also might be able to overcome the residual rivalry between New Side and Old Side Presbyterians and steer the church in America in a healthier direction.

At first Witherspoon declined, in the face of his wife's impassioned objections. But eventually she relented, and in August 1768 the Scottish divine and his family arrived in America, where they were welcomed with hospitality bordering on rapture. Witherspoon's new surroundings must at first have given him a dose of culture shock. The town of Princeton contained perhaps 50 dwellings—a far cry from the thriving city in Scotland he had just left behind. As for the vaunted College of New Jersey, except for the new president's home (which was still being built), its campus consisted of exactly one building: a three-story, stone structure known as Nassau Hall, which served as a combination dormitory, classroom building, and chapel. The teaching staff consisted of the president, one professor, and two or three tutors. The student body comprised fewer than 100 teenage boys.

But there was much about the school that he undoubtedly found familiar and satisfying: its rigorously classical curriculum, for example. Like other colonial colleges in those days, much of Princeton's curriculum, especially in the freshmen and sophomore years, centered on the intensive study of ancient Greek and Latin literature in the original languages. An accomplished Latinist himself, Witherspoon

1760 engraving of Princeton's Nassau Hall



corresponded with one of his sons in Latin, and when he built a country home a mile north of town a few years later, he named it “Tusculum,” after the town in ancient Italy where Cicero had his villa.

Nor did the new president seem fazed by the highly regimented work environment that he would now oversee. In 1770, early in his tenure, a typical day on campus ran thus: At 5:00 in the morning, students were awakened by a bell and given half an hour to dress. At 5:30 they assembled for compulsory morning prayers, after which they studied until breakfast at 8. After breakfast, they were free until 9, when they went off to “recitation” (class) for four hours. After dinner, which was served at 1 p.m., they were on their own until study time between 3 and 5 in the afternoon. At 5 o’clock, a bell summoned them to evening prayers, followed by supper at 7. At 9 p.m., another bell signaled that they must return to their rooms for study and sleep. On Sundays they were required to attend two services: one at 11 a.m. in the local Presbyterian church, the other at 3 p.m. in Nassau Hall. Dr. Witherspoon, of course, delivered the sermons in both places.

A FELT PRESENCE

The new college president wasted no time in doing what college administrators, even then, had to do: raise money and advertise. Before long he had stabilized his institution’s rickety finances and augmented its library. Between 1768 and 1770 he undertook successful fundraising trips in New England and the South, where he preached sermons, met leading men of affairs, and fortified his connections with fellow Presbyterians, who began to look to him as their leader. His lengthy travels gave him a capacious sense of America that relatively few of the native-born yet possessed.

But Witherspoon had not come all the way from Europe to be a mere administrator. The heavy-set minister was a man of force and strong convictions. In the pulpit he delivered his elaborate sermons entirely from memory, without a note in front of him—an attribute that hugely impressed his listeners. Never flamboyant in his public addresses, he exuded what we today would call gravitas. One of his students later wrote that Witherspoon had “more of the quality called *presence*” than anyone the student ever met except for George Washington. On campus, Witherspoon soon made his presence felt.

Here we come to the first way in which Princeton’s new pedagogy helped to shape America’s founding



Seal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, founded in 1789

generation. Although in Scotland he had made himself notorious by lampooning the worldliness, smugness, and theological laxity of the Moderates in the Scottish national church, on a deeper intellectual level he was closer to them than it seemed. Like many of them, he had been profoundly touched by the 18th-century intellectual cloudburst known as the Scottish Enlightenment. And it was the Scottish variant of the Enlightenment that this Calvinist pastor now imported into Princeton, from which, via his students, it shortly entered the mainstream of American thought.

When Witherspoon arrived in 1768, Princeton’s intellectual atmosphere still bore some of the marks of its revivalistic origins. The college’s tutors were ardent partisans of the philosophical idealism associated with Bishop George Berkeley in England and Jonathan Edwards in America. To the tutors’ dismay, the new president vehemently rejected Berkeleyan idealism, or “immaterialism” as he insisted on calling it. He soon instructed his students:

The truth is, the immaterial system is a wild and ridiculous attempt to unsettle the principles of common sense by metaphysical reasoning, which can hardly produce any thing but contempt in the generality of persons who hear it, and which I verily believe, never produced conviction even in the persons who pretend to espouse it.

Within a year the disappointed tutors had left the college, and Witherspoon had added the professorship of divinity to his duties.

Far from being a fervent, New Side revivalist, Witherspoon turned out to be a vigorous adherent of what we now call Scottish realism—and a tenacious foe of abstract metaphysical speculation of all kinds. The immigrant Scots preacher was a man with his feet on the ground, and the ground to him was real. Disdaining both the turgidity of Berkeleyan idealism and the radical epistemological skepticism of David Hume, he stoutly defended a philosophy of what he called “plain common sense.” In Witherspoon’s world there was no irreconcilable conflict between reason and biblical revelation. “If the Scripture is true,” he told his students, “the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter.” Significantly, his inaugural address as president was entitled *On the Unity of Piety and Science*.

Historians agree that Witherspoon was the principal conduit of Scottish common sense realism into American intellectual life. As one scholar has written, he “brought the Enlightenment from Scotland to the College of New Jersey and gave it an evangelical baptism.” Thanks to Witherspoon and his disciples, Scottish “moral sense” and “common sense” philosophy came to dominate the American academic landscape for the next one hundred years.

More importantly for our purposes, Witherspoon’s worldview and no-nonsense temperament meshed easily with the pragmatic and experimental cast of American thought at the time of the nation’s founding and beyond. Moreover, his teaching carried profoundly democratic and very timely political

implications. If all people (as Witherspoon taught) are endowed with an innate moral sense (called “conscience”) as well as common sense which permits us to apprehend self-evident truths, what did this tell us about the capacity of all people for self-government? When combined with Witherspoon’s unshakable Calvinism, with *its* insistence on men’s imperfection and depravity, his middle-of-the-road philosophy acted both as a stimulus to political betterment *and* as a brake on the utopian impulses and faith in human self-sufficiency latent in the Enlightenment project. Good Calvinist that he was, Witherspoon recognized that (as Mark Twain later wrote) “there is a little bit of human nature in all of us.” In other words, man’s capacity for reason does not make man perfect or perfectible. By stressing both a “common sense,” realist philosophy and humanity’s innate propensity to sin, Witherspoon helped to make the *American Enlightenment* a comparatively pragmatic, nonideological phenomenon. It is not far-fetched, for instance, to discern echoes of Witherspoon in his student James Madison’s hardheaded ruminations about human nature in the *Federalist Papers*.

“SCHOOL FOR SEDITION”

The primary vehicle for Witherspoon’s eclectic teaching was his required senior year course in moral philosophy: an amalgam of ethics, political philosophy, and jurisprudence. Witherspoon used no textbook. Instead, he wrote out an extensive set of lecture notes, which each student was then obliged to copy *in toto*. It was only after Witherspoon’s death that his lecture notes were published. Long before

Anonymous portrait of Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755)



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**THE IMMIGRANT SCOTS
PREACHER WAS A
MAN WITH HIS FEET
ON THE GROUND,
AND THE GROUND TO
HIM WAS REAL.**

”

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PRINCETON WAS BECOMING KNOWN AS A 'SCHOOL FOR STATESMEN'—OR, AS ITS DETRACTORS THOUGHT, A 'SEMINARY OF SEDITION.'

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then, handwritten copies circulated far beyond the College of New Jersey, as his former students—and students of students—disseminated his teachings throughout the nation. By these lectures the president introduced a generation of young Princetonians to the works of John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, and Montesquieu, among others. Heavy on Whig political theory and 17th-century republican theory, the lectures helped to mold his students' political identity and provide them with the conceptual tools and vocabulary for political discourse—discourse that eventuated in resistance to the British monarchy and the founding of the American republic.

Witherspoon soon put his stamp on the college's curriculum in other ways. Keenly interested in the sciences (although no scientist himself), in 1771 he appointed the college's first professor of mathematics and natural philosophy (science). Thus the study of the world was placed on a par with the study of divinity. By 1772, Witherspoon himself was teaching not only divinity and moral philosophy but chronology, history, and rhetoric as well. When published after his death, his *Lectures on Eloquence* had the distinction of becoming, according to most students of the subject, the first American treatise on rhetoric.

The arts of rhetoric, in fact, seemed to fascinate the new college president. In 1771 he inaugurated the practice of holding speaking contests in English, Latin, and Greek on the day before Commencement. Any student in the college could compete for the prizes. Many of the speeches focused on current political controversies. He expanded the college's tradition of

having freshmen, sophomores, and juniors recite orations every night on a special stage in Nassau Hall after evening prayers. Formerly, two students had been called upon to perform each evening; Witherspoon increased the quota to three. Seniors were permitted to declaim just once every five or six weeks, but they were obliged to compose their own orations and to deliver them in front of invited guests. As if all this supervised speechmaking were not enough, in 1769 and 1770 (with Witherspoon's apparent blessing) the undergraduates themselves organized the American Whig and Cliosophic societies, which engaged in spirited, literary "paper wars" against each other. In all these ways, the indefatigable Witherspoon prepared his young charges for lives of service on a larger stage.

Increasingly, it was that *larger* stage—the turbulent world of imperial and colonial politics—that impinged on the consciousness of his academic village. Witherspoon arrived in the New World at a time of growing turmoil brought on by the British government's attempts to tax its North American colonies. Although Witherspoon did not immediately enter the controversy, it was not hard to infer where his sympathies lay. At the Commencement ceremonies in 1769, the College of New Jersey ostentatiously awarded honorary degrees to John Dickinson, author of the patriotic *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, and to John Hancock, whose sloop *Liberty* the British had recently seized for supposedly failing to pay import duties on all its cargo. At the Commencement exercises in 1770, Witherspoon's son James, a graduating senior, delivered an oration in Latin asserting the duty of subjects of a king to resist him if he acted tyrannically. At Commencement in 1771, the seniors Hugh Breckenridge and Philip Freneau (who

Engraving of the Boston Tea Party by W. D. Cooper (1789)





Philadelphia's Second Presbyterian Church, built after the split between New Side and Old Side Presbyterians

went on to later literary fame) presented a rousing, original patriotic poem entitled “The Rising Glory of America” to thunderous applause.

Occasionally, the displays of Whiggish sentiment took more dramatic form. Early in 1774, shortly after the Boston Tea Party, the students at Princeton staged a “tea party” of their own. They seized the college steward’s winter store of tea, and, as the campus bell tolled, burned the tea in a bonfire, along with an effigy of Massachusetts’ royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson, with a canister of tea strung around his neck. President Witherspoon did not interfere. Some weeks later, a group of his students organized their own militia company, complete with uniforms. Again the president made no known effort to stop them.

All this patriotic ferment underscored a subtle but deepening trend at the college in the 1770s and beyond. Although still an institution where more than 40% of the students were called to the Protestant ministry, it was becoming known as well as a “school for statesmen”—or, as its detractors thought, a “seminary of sedition.” Witherspoon’s reorientation of the curriculum and his emphasis on rigorous training in public speaking encouraged this secularizing process.

All this might not have mattered too much except for one fact: in the early 1770s, there were only nine colleges in the British colonies on the Atlantic seaboard. Between 1769 and 1775, just 830 young men took their B.A. degrees from these institutions. Of them, 150 (nearly 20%) came from the College of New Jersey. Strategically located between New York and Philadelphia, and drawing its clientele increasingly from the South (where there were no colleges, except for William and Mary), by 1775 Witherspoon’s school had a more geographically diverse enrollment than any of its competitors. By this measure, it was the least parochial and most national of America’s educational institutions.

It was also the educational capital of American Presbyterianism, a rapidly growing segment of the religious population. By 1775 there were nearly 600 Presbyterian churches in the 13 colonies, and immigration from Presbyterian Scotland and Northern Ireland was surging, at the rate of 10,000 new settlers per year. As the most prominent Presbyterian clergyman in the American colonies, Witherspoon knew that when he spoke, more likely than not his religious brethren would listen.

AN IMPRIMATUR FOR WAR

So far Witherspoon had spoken very little—at least publicly—about the quarrel between the colonies and the mother country. By 1774 his reticence had receded. Meeting Witherspoon for the first time that summer, John Adams found him “as high a Son of Liberty as any Man in America.” Once upon a time, back at his parish in Scotland, Witherspoon had preached that it was a sin for a minister “to desire or claim the direction of such matters as fall within the province of the civil magistrates.” But in the wake of the Boston Tea Party and the British reprisals known as the Coercive Acts, he changed his mind.

Here we come to the second great contribution that Witherspoon made to the forging of an American identity in the founding era: his labors as a public intellectual and activist in support of the American cause. On July 4, 1774, he took his first overt step into the arena by accepting membership on the committee of correspondence for Somerset County. A little over two weeks later, he joined his fellow committeemen at a provincial congress that elected New Jersey’s delegates to the First Continental Congress. The following December, he was reelected to his county’s committee of correspondence and endorsed the resolves

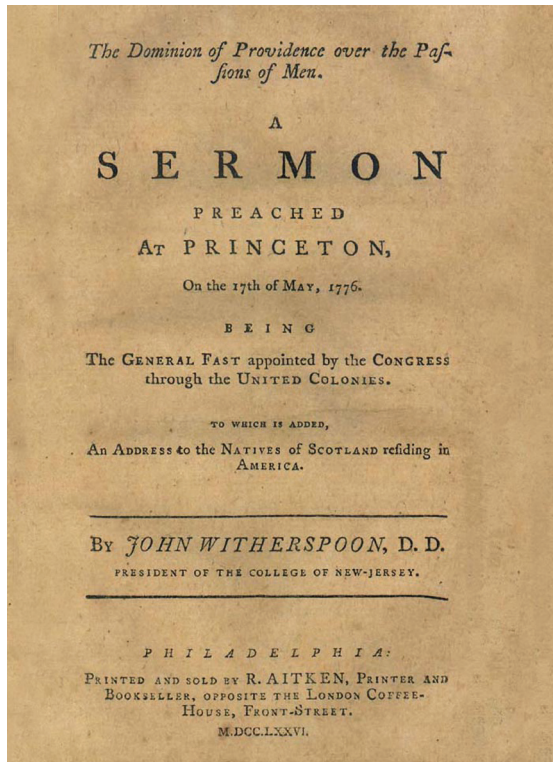
recently adopted by the Congress in Philadelphia. A few months later, in May 1775, at the annual meeting of the Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia and New York, just weeks after the battles of Lexington and Concord, he chaired the committee that drafted a powerful pastoral letter that was read in Presbyterian pulpits throughout the region. While moderate in tone and respectful of King George III, the document nevertheless described Britain’s recent actions as “unmerited oppression” and called upon American Presbyterians to “adhere firmly” to the resolutions of the Continental Congress. Bit by bit, with Witherspoon in the vanguard, colonial Presbyterians were inching toward a break with the British Empire.

By the spring of 1776 Witherspoon was an outspoken advocate of American independence. This became apparent to all on May 17, when he delivered at Princeton what was probably the most consequential sermon of his life. In it he solemnly asserted that separation from Britain and resistance to its authority were now justified.

You are all my witnesses [he declared] that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful but justified, and I willingly embrace

Oil mural by Allyn Cox in the U.S. Capitol’s House wing, depicting the First Continental Congress of 1774





The title page of Witherspoon's May 17, 1776, sermon

the opportunity of delivering my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature.... There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore, we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.

Witherspoon's sensational sermon was quickly published. Although its precise impact is difficult to measure, its import was plain: the most distinguished Presbyterian and Scottish immigrant in North America had just given his imprimatur to the war for independence.

A few weeks later, after Witherspoon participated in deposing New Jersey's royalist governor, New Jersey's provincial congress elected Witherspoon to its delegation to the Second Continental Congress, meeting in nearby Philadelphia. The delegates arrived at the end of June, just as Congress was deliberating whether to adopt a resolution for independence. Even now, some members hesitated to take the final step. But not Witherspoon. When one

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‘THERE IS NOT A SINGLE INSTANCE IN HISTORY IN WHICH CIVIL LIBERTY WAS LOST AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY PRESERVED ENTIRE.’
”

of the members (possibly John Dickinson) objected that the country was “not yet ripe for so important and decisive a measure,” Witherspoon replied that in *his* judgment “it was not only ripe for the measure but in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it.”

We shall probably never know whether Witherspoon's tart rejoinder tipped the scales. But within hours of his speech, Congress voted on July 2 for independence and, on July 4, for the Declaration of Independence that he signed.

For the Presbyterian minister, clad always in clerical garb, this was not the end, but merely the end of the beginning, of his political career. For six of the next seven years, while still serving as his college's president and pastor of a church in Princeton, he was a leading member of the Continental Congress, where he represented New Jersey and served on 126 committees (more, it appears, than anyone else), including the Board of War.

If his colleagues manifestly respected his intellect and character, so, too, in their own way, did the British. In the summer of 1776, British troops on Long Island burned him in effigy. A New Jersey Loyalist and Anglican minister named Jonathan Odell publicly excoriated him in a poem as “Witherspoon the great”:

I've known him to seek the dungeon dark as night
Imprison'd Tories to convert or fight,
Whilst to myself I've hummed in dismal tune
I'd rather be a dog than Witherspoon.

Across the ocean, King George and others referred to the war as a “Presbyterian rebellion”; it is likely



Washington After the Battle of Princeton, painting by Charles Willson Peale (1779)

that they had a certain renegade Scotsman in mind. The British general Sir Guy Carleton later called Witherspoon a “political firebrand who perhaps had not a less place in the revolution than Washington himself. He poisons the minds of his young students and through them the Continent.”

RAVAGED BY WAR

Even after the Revolution was won, Witherspoon did not forsake the public square, where he argued for hard-money economic policies and measures nationalistic in tendency. In 1787, as a delegate to New Jersey’s ratification convention, he voted to ratify the proposed new Constitution devised in part by his onetime student, James Madison. It is a mark of Witherspoon’s stature that, when George Washington rode north to New York City in 1789 to take his oath of office as our first president, he visited Witherspoon in Princeton and may have spent the night at Tusculum.

But if the American Revolution brought Witherspoon new influence, it had not been without cost. In 1777 his eldest son, a major in the American army,

died in the battle of Germantown. The College of New Jersey also suffered enormously. In the autumn of 1776, as British soldiers pressed down from the north, Witherspoon closed the college, sent the students home, and fled to safety in Pennsylvania. When the redcoats arrived on December 7, they occupied Nassau Hall and ravaged the community. Three weeks later, after George Washington famously crossed the Delaware, it was the British who were obliged to give ground. At the battle of Princeton, on January 3, 1777, some of the retreating British soldiers smashed the windows of Nassau Hall in order to fire upon the Americans. The Americans proceeded to pound the building with cannon fire. One of the cannon balls evidently sailed through an open window and decapitated the college’s portrait of King George II. Not long after that, the trapped British troops surrendered. (The frame of this portrait, by the way, was later recovered. It now holds a magnificent portrait of “George Washington at the Battle of Princeton” by Charles Willson Peale that Witherspoon helped to commission in 1783. The painting is in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum today.)

For the next several months, American soldiers occupied the campus, with little more regard for property than the redcoats had shown. Indeed, for the next five years the impoverished college was but a skeleton of its former self, graduating no more than seven students a year. Although the Continental Congress eventually awarded the college nearly \$20,000 to repair its badly damaged physical plant, it did so in depreciated paper currency worth only 5% of its face value. (This may help to explain Witherspoon’s attitude toward paper money.) It would be years before Nassau Hall was again fully habitable.

But there were compensations. In mid-1783 the Continental Congress itself, in a state of panic, left Philadelphia and took up residence in Princeton after a mob of mutinous American soldiers in Philadelphia demanded their back pay. From June to the following November, Congress conducted its sessions in Nassau Hall. During these months the town of Princeton and the College of New Jersey were literally the capital of the United States. At the college’s commencement that September, the members of Congress, “as a compliment” to the college and its revered president, attended the ceremonies *en masse*. Among those present was another visiting dignitary, George Washington.

Prestige and praise, of course, could not pay the bills, and in the ensuing decade Witherspoon

struggled mightily to improve his college's solvency as well as its intellectual luster. It was a daunting task, but he lived to see the institution award 37 B.A. degrees in 1792—the most, to that date, in its history.

A LEGACY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

More and more, in his final years, Witherspoon spent time at Tusculum, where he pursued his clerical and political interests and his hobby of what he fondly called “scientific farming.” Here, too, his “common sense” approach to life prevailed: to him, scientific farming primarily meant growing vegetables. One day a visiting lady said to him: “Why Doctor, you have no flowers in your garden!” “No, Madam,” he answered, “no flowers in my garden, nor in my discourses either!”

In 1794 the “old doctor” (as he was called) died at his home at the age of 71. How may we sum up his contributions to America's founding? First, as I have indicated, he introduced and disseminated the tenets of Scottish common sense philosophy in fertile intellectual soil, helping thereby to shape the contours of the American mind for generations to come. You might say that he gave the Enlightenment in America a Calvinist twist, rendering it more resistant to abstract ideology and utopian illusions than it might otherwise have been. Second, his unflagging intellectual and political activism in the 1770s and 1780s bestowed crucial legitimacy on the cause of American liberty. Without his extraordinary influence among Presbyterians, without his aura of

gravitas and his nationalistic sensibility, the baker's dozen of American colonies might well have stumbled in other directions.

Finally, we cannot fully comprehend Witherspoon's legacy without mentioning his remarkable success as an educator and mentor. Princeton in his time was a tiny institution by modern standards. At Witherspoon's death its faculty consisted of just five individuals. During his 26 years as the college's president, it awarded only 478 bachelor's degrees, an average of fewer than 20 per year.

But think of what these men accomplished! The graduates of the College of New Jersey during Witherspoon's tenure included:

- 12 members of the Continental Congress
- 5 delegates to the Constitutional Convention
- 1 president of the United States (James Madison)
- 1 vice president of the United States
- 28 U.S. senators
- 49 members of the U.S. House of Representatives
- 12 governors
- 3 Supreme Court justices

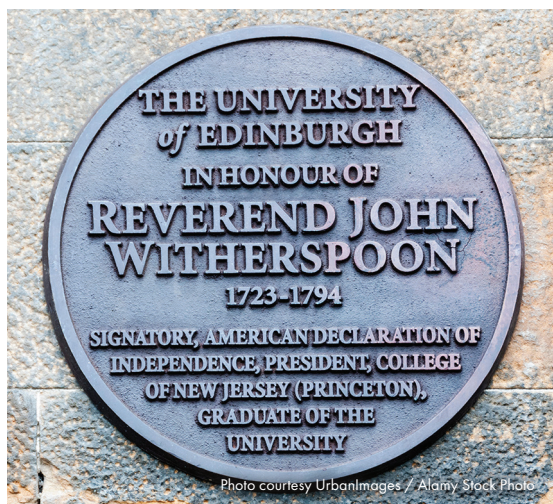
Thirteen Princetonians who graduated during Witherspoon's presidency became college presidents themselves. In fact, more than 10 American colleges and academies were founded by men who took their degrees under Witherspoon. Sir Guy Carleton was right: the “old doctor” had spread his influence through a continent.

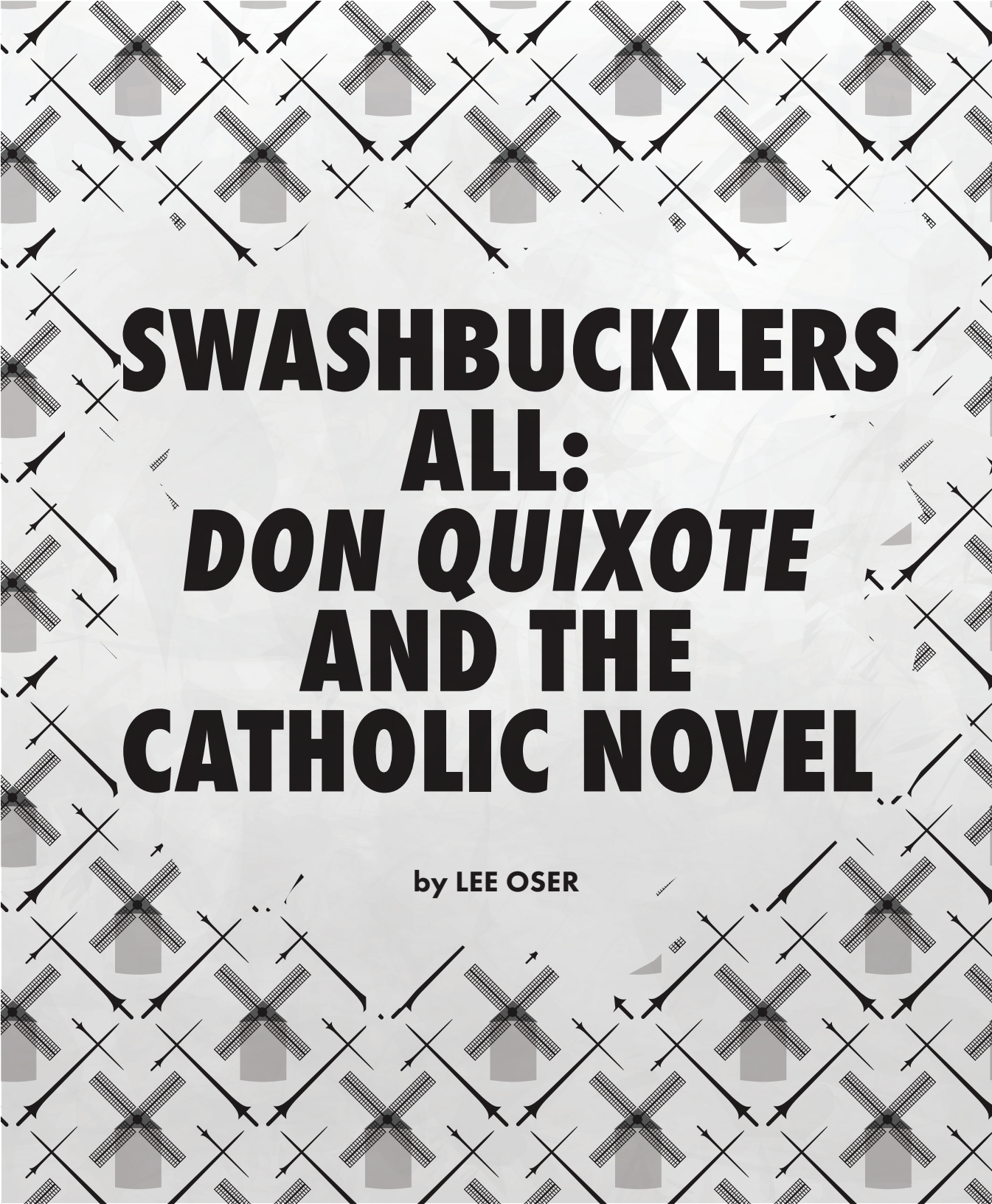
As the sesquicentennial of our national independence approaches, let us hope that the Reverend John Witherspoon will again be recognized for his extraordinarily consequential devotion to the three lodestars of his life: religious faith, higher education, and American liberty. It was a calling that helped make America what it became. **RL**

This essay is adapted from a lecture presented at the ISI Summer Institute in Princeton in June 2011.

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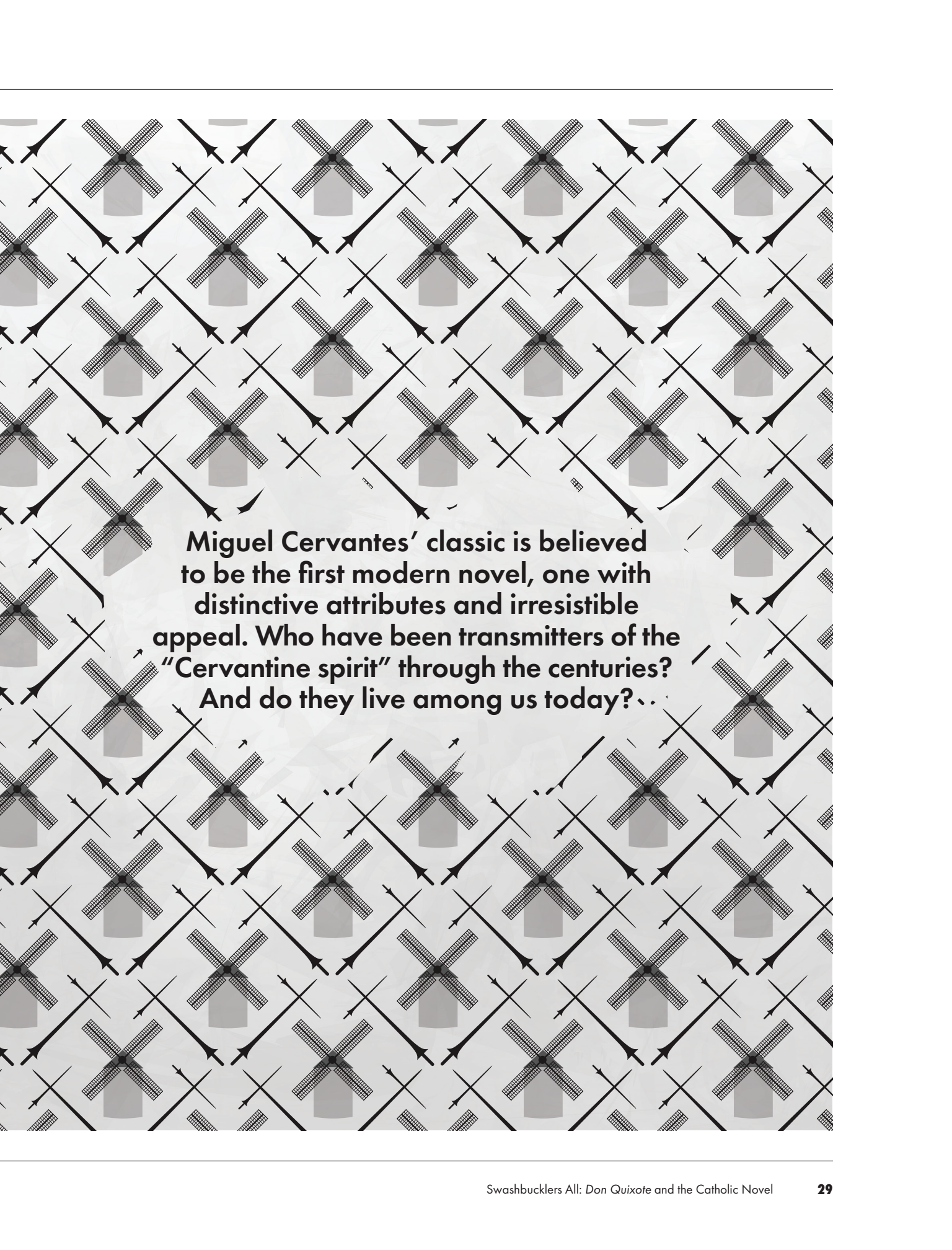
Plaque at the University of Edinburgh School of Divinity





SWASHBUCKLERS ALL: *DON QUIXOTE* AND THE CATHOLIC NOVEL

by **LEE OSER**



Miguel Cervantes' classic is believed to be the first modern novel, one with distinctive attributes and irresistible appeal. Who have been transmitters of the "Cervantine spirit" through the centuries? And do they live among us today?..

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NO AUTHENTIC PORTRAIT of the author of *Don Quixote* exists. Studying this gargantuan figure and his omnivorous relish for life, we are led to wonder what canvas could contain him. He takes us far from the world-weary aesthete among his books and absinthe: “Living? Our servants will do that for us” (Villiers). Cervantes did his own living, and *Don Quixote*’s translator Tom Lathrop is right: “You might be surprised at how much Cervantes’s swashbuckling life affected this work.” *Swashbuckling*. The adjective derives from *swashbuckler*, meaning one who beats his sword against his own or his enemy’s shield. It’s not the first word that comes to mind when

discussing the lives of English and American writers. Dr. Johnson? Clubbable, tough-minded, a wonderful talker, but no swashbuckler. William Shakespeare? Never spent a day in jail. What about Geoffrey Chaucer, James Baldwin, or F. Scott Fitzgerald? It just doesn’t fit. There’s too much swagger in it, with a charmless hint of dubious manners, low company, and the halitotic reek of garlic.

Even so, let us seek out a couple of comparisons to try and take Cervantes’ measure. Since the novel’s rise in English, which we may conveniently date to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), one tends to think of the middle class as the nursery of novelists. But with Cervantes in mind, we must scour the field for the exceptions, for the scrappers and fighters among whom Dickens wears the honorary crown. Dickens’ boyhood degradation, his three-year ordeal in a blacking factory due to his father’s financial ruin, had a happy ending. I have no desire to disparage Dickens or to sully his fame. But, fortunately for us all, Dickens was back in school at the age of 15. At 24, he serialized his first (and most Cervantine) novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, affirming, in his fashion, the middle-class virtues that Defoe had emblazoned on England’s national consciousness in the previous century.

What about Catholic novelists? Tolkien lost his father at the age of three—an event that erased the family’s income. In consequence, the Tolkiens relocated to England from what is now the Republic of South Africa. At the age of 12, he lost his mother, after she alienated her kin and their support by converting to Roman Catholicism. The future author retained his middle-class footing by dint of hard work and brainpower, completing his Oxford degree before serving as a lieutenant at the Battle of the Somme, where he witnessed horrors that clung to his pen. In 1925, after a professorial stint at the University of Leeds, he returned to Oxford permanently, still a young man and well-established in his early 30s.

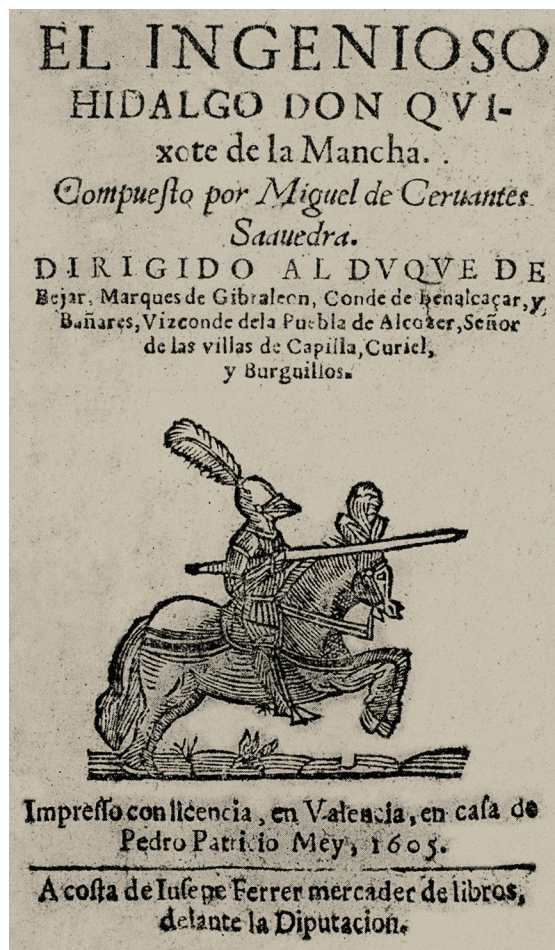
These are admirable stories, which remind us that novelists do not normally clamor for victim status or start out as “creative writing majors.” Their real school is the world. It is notable, though, that, while both Dickens and Tolkien overcame trauma, neither man seized on madness as his great theme. Neither went mad. Madmen do not loom large in their writings. Mr. Dick is too childlike to be a full-blown madman, and Gollum is a schizophrenic monster.

What can we say about Cervantes? The likelihood of his Jewish ancestry, that his family descended



An unauthenticated portrait of Cervantes, commonly attributed, against modern scholarship, to Juan de Jáuregui

1605 title page to *Don Quixote*



from Jewish converts to Catholicism, merits our attention due to a series of nauseating decrees issued by the Spanish crown concerning racial status. The 1609 exile of the Moriscos (Muslim converts) from Spain, like Sancho Panza's proud identity as an "Old Christian," is writ large throughout *Don Quixote*. For our purposes, the point may simply be that the Catholic novel gets its start in a Mediterranean milieu, a multiethnic milieu that returns in novels by G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Walker Percy, and John Kennedy Toole, which stand in the tradition of Cervantes. And as was the case for Cervantes, the moral complexity of this demographic stew demands a moral response.

LEPANTO AND ITS AFTERMATH

The son of a barber in the gory days of barber-surgeons, Cervantes was born not far from Madrid in 1547. In the same year, the first of the "purity-of-blood" decrees appeared. The boy who would write *Don Quixote* grew up in poverty and moved around a lot. A record exists of him in 1568–69, studying in Madrid under a humanist priest. How he got there is a mystery. Shortly thereafter, having injured a rival in a duel (the arrest warrant called for cutting off his right hand), he fled Spain and found refuge in Rome, in the household of a young cardinal. After his military career and later imprisonment among Christian slaves in Algiers, he crisscrossed the Kingdom of Granada as a tax collector, only to be thrown into debtor's prison when his banker lost the state's money. Here is the famous self-portrait from the Prologue to his *Exemplary Novels* (1613), as translated by B. W. Ife:

This man you see here, with aquiline face, chestnut hair, smooth, unwrinkled brow, joyful eyes and curved though well-proportioned nose, silvery beard which not twenty years ago was golden, large moustache, small mouth, teeth neither small nor large, since he has only six, and these are in poor condition and worse alignment; of middle height, neither tall nor short, fresh faced, rather fair than dark; somewhat stooping and none too light on his feet; this I say, is the likeness of the author of...*Don Quijote de la Mancha*....He is commonly called Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. He was many years a soldier, five and a half a prisoner, when he learned patience in adversity. He lost his left hand in the naval battle of Lepanto, from a blunderbuss

“

**DON QUIXOTE IS
LONG, EXUBERANT,
PICARESQUE, SATIRICAL,
PARODIC, VIOLENT,
AND GROTESQUE.**

”

wound, which, although it looks ugly, he considers beautiful, since he collected it in the greatest and most memorable event that past centuries have ever seen or those to come may hope to see, fighting beneath the victorious banners of the son of that glorious warrior, Charles V of happy memory.

When shepherds with their slingshots repay Don Quixote for killing seven of their sheep, he loses “three or four teeth and molars.” Cervantes had watched his barber-surgeon father in action, but, as we can see, the painful reality was more intimate. His years in captivity came after his heroics at the Battle of Lepanto, the civilizational clash that most recalls Salamis, because on its bloody hinges history truly turned. Five years later, he was on board a ship

Statue of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in Madrid (c. 1930)



captured by Barbary pirates. Cast into an Algiers prison, he “learned patience in adversity” until, after another span of five years, a mendicant order called the Trinitarians ransomed him from his Muslim captors. These are the hard facts, as unsettling to our modern sensibilities as they are intrinsic to the action of *Don Quixote*.

And yet, Cervantes in his self-portrait does not seem the least put out. By his own account, his eyes are “joyful.” If anything, he seems pleased with himself and his hard-earned fame. He accepts the indignities of age with magnanimity. He glories in his sacrifice at Lepanto. And he lauds the late Don Juan of Austria, anticipating the closing lines from Chesterton’s “Lepanto”: “*Vivat Hispania! / Domino Gloria! / Don John of Austria / Has set his people free!*” The stakes at Lepanto were exceptionally high, in a way that is nowadays unfamiliar and suspect.

Don Quixote was published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615. The work is long, exuberant, picaresque, satirical, parodic, violent, and grotesque. It is infinitely inventive and unsparing in its designs on the funny bone. At the same time, it is rich in pathos, unsentimental, and elevated in its tragic dignity. Here we have a book for the ages! The unreliable narrator, working largely from the manuscript of an Arab historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli (Señor Eggplant), recounts the adventures of a middle-aged gentleman who loses his mind reading chivalric romances. Alonso Quixano adopts the name of Don Quixote, dresses up in ridiculous armor, mounts his old nag, Rocinante, and sets off from his village in La Mancha in central Spain. Haggard of mien, he is accompanied by the shorter Sancho Panza, a belly of a man and an unpredictable compound of simplicity and sagacity. Quixote is determined to revive the lost tradition of knight errantry, and Sancho is his loyal squire, vainly warning him that those “giants” are windmills, or that a “castle” is in fact an inn on the king’s highway. Quixote’s inamorata is the beautiful and virtuous Dulcinea del Toboso, in reality a squat, unattractive peasant, though Quixote’s devotion is absolute. It is the first modern novel, the definitive departure from the long line of chivalric romances with their fantastic Merlins and lovelorn Lancelots, a medieval genre that Cervantes renders sublimely ridiculous. It follows that the origin of the novel is steeped in satire and irony.

Cervantes’ Christianity is expressed in his fiction, but its nuances pose a challenge. Cervantes was not an atheist *avant la lettre*, clairvoyantly anticipating the



Photo by Wilfredor/ Wikipedia

Performance of *Don Quixote*, starring Claudia Olaiz and Andrés Villarroel at the Teresa Carreño Theatre in Venezuela (2013)

glories of Richard Dawkins. Like his closest predecessor, Rabelais, he was an Erasmian Catholic Christian. The prolific writings of Erasmus, although the first Roman *Index* (1559) banned them without exception, enjoyed immense popularity in Spain. Because *Don Quixote* is a satire, we must especially acknowledge *The Praise of Folly* (1511). Like Erasmus' Folly, *Don Quixote* offers the priceless balm of comic relief. Cervantes regards the Spanish Inquisition with the same satirical eye Erasmus had applied to the institutions of Europe. The spiritual key, however, is that for both men the philosophy of Christ centers on the Sermon on the Mount.

The Inquisition Tribunal as depicted by Francisco de Goya (1812–1819)



THE CERVANTINE TRADITION

Before reaching into our stack of Catholic novels, we should at least glance at the Cervantine tradition that forms their background: that is, Cervantes' worldwide impact, along with his particular influence among novelists in English. Voltaire's picaresque satire *Candide* (1759) is the most important continental novel to pay homage to Cervantes. A deist, not a Catholic, Voltaire pursues his outrageous satire of theological madness (in this respect we can call him Erasmian) to arrive at a quietist moral, which recalls the dying reflections of Alonso Quixano the Good: "*Il faut cultiver notre*



CERVANTES REGARDS THE SPANISH INQUISITION WITH THE SAME SATIRICAL EYE ERASMUS HAD APPLIED TO THE INSTITUTIONS OF EUROPE.





G. K. Chesterton at the age of 17

jardin” (We must cultivate our garden). Alongside Voltaire, we would at a bare minimum have to consider works by Goethe, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Galdós, Bulgakov, and, crossing the Atlantic, García Márquez and the short-story writer Borges. Britain, Ireland, and America produced novels by Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Austen, Melville, George Eliot, Twain, Joyce, and Wodehouse that bear the Cervantine stamp, though critics disagree over what this stamp actually reveals. The topic is immense—for instance, Cervantes is often claimed as a forbear of literary modernism—and, in a sense, it is well served by a relatively narrow focus such as our own.

The longstanding question of Cervantes’ impact on the English novel is nowadays a dessert item in the food fight of academic politics. Despite the charges flying about of Anglophilia and anti-Hispanic racism, I agree with those who see a sea change between *Don Quixote* and the Protestant tradition we have identified with Defoe. The essential difference is between an external and an internal approach to reality. *Don Quixote* generally relies on third-person narration. *Robinson Crusoe*, by contrast, takes place in the first-person (“I was born in 1632...”). The Puritan tradition of spiritual autobiography informs

Defoe’s work. Robinson Crusoe keeps a diary. He has bad dreams. *Don Quixote*, though often compared to *Hamlet*, is not bathed in introspection. It is contemporary with the emergence of the art of caricature in the Carracci Academy in Bologna. It is also contemporary with Marlowe and Jonson, who brought the art of caricature to the English stage, though their reference point was, like that of Cervantes himself, the old psychology of the humors. Marlowe’s Barabas and Jonson’s Volpone are obsessive, humorous characters, two-dimensional, lacking in psychological depth, but worth more in universal human significance than a host of pseudo-Hamlets. Voltaire keeps Cervantes’ external perspective, and so by and large does Dickens, who is stupidly accused of writing caricature but whose steady artistic self-awareness appears in the audience’s response to the bad Hamlet of Mr. Wopsle: “As for example, on the question whether ’twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions, said ‘toss for it.’”

And now for our stack of Catholic novels. The biggest surprise in Chesterton’s *Return of Don Quixote* (1927) is, if you can get your hands on it, the brilliant introduction by the late Donald Barr (father of the former attorney general), a classic of scholarly erudition and critical judgment, which graces the Ignatius Press edition (volume 7 of the *Collected Works*). As Barr observes, this novel faces a central snag, in that the lunacy of Chesterton’s Quixote figure, an ex-librarian turned “King-at-Arms” by the Yeatsian name of Michael Herne, is an esoteric form of political madness. In other words, Herne’s mad devotion to distributism requires too much explication from the narrator, whereas the nature of Don Quixote’s madness is self-evident. *The Return of Don Quixote* achieves a scattershot of strong impressions, reminding us that Chesterton was a gifted illustrator. His love of acrobats emerges when an English gentleman “turned a cartwheel for the top of the cab,” a feat directly reminiscent of Don Quixote. The gentleman in question, a society wag named Douglas Murrel, assigns himself the role of Sancho, and he and Herne depart the scene of their aborted political revolution to pursue adventures in the country. The Catholic dimension, which is largely architectural, supports Chesterton’s romantic sense of the past but fails to fuse with the economic and political elements into a persuasive whole.

Fortunately, there is more to say on Chesterton’s behalf. The best place to go for Cervantes’ impact is a

novel published before Chesterton's 1922 conversion to Rome. *The Flying Inn* (1914) is a minor masterpiece: inventive, satirical, rollicking, swashbuckling, and funny. Its Quixote figure is an "Irish adventurer," Patrick Dalroy, whose Sancho is an English publican, Humphrey Pump. The reason behind their mad rambles is economic oppression that requires no explanation, and Chesterton's knack for characterizing the ruling class by its faddish artistic turns makes for piercing satire, though at the cost of Cervantes' insights into universal human folly. More so than in *The Return of Don Quixote*, poems and songs counterpoint the action—a true Cervantine technique. Likewise, Chesterton shares Cervantes' skepticism toward the human intellect, which easily lends itself to logic games in service of what Augustine called the *libido dominandi*. This helps explain why Chesterton's writing is a sustained revolt against excessive psychologizing. A final key point of contact between *The Flying Inn* and *Don Quixote* is its immersion in civilizational conflict and in the life of soldiers.

LUNATICS AND SOLDIERS

Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honor* trilogy (1952–1961; recension 1964) is arguably the greatest novel of the 20th century. Where Chesterton's best novels are ignored but for a small, loyal following, Waugh's trilogy continues to inspire considerable defensiveness and snobbery (the closest parallel is clearly Tolkien). Its epic scope approaches that of Cervantes. Lathrop

Evelyn Waugh (c. 1940)



Photo by Carl Van Vechten, courtesy of the Library of Congress

informs us that the author of *Don Quixote* "created 371 characters (230 of whom have speaking roles)." In Waugh, we witness a similarly high level of inventiveness. Our stylistic and thematic concerns return. Lunatics run wild, civilization is in peril, soldiers are on the march. We have satire, parody, and raucous comedy side by side with tragic dignity. Waugh's trilogy is tragicomic; *Don Quixote* takes on a tragic dimension in its transcendent vision of humanity. It must be admitted, however, that Waugh, unlike Cervantes, is vulnerable to charges of sentimentality. He was passionately attached to old Catholic England. But the fact of pre-Reformation England is not a fantasy genre. The legacy of Cobbett, Newman, Ruskin, Pugin, and Chesterton—the line of English intellectuals for whom the fact counted—is not an illusion in need of shattering. The sentimental element exists in Waugh, a romantic rejoinder to the unsmiling Inner Party official, much as Burke's "moral imagination" will generally appeal to the common reader more than to the academic, because the academic lives in abject terror of ridicule.

The Quixote of *Sword of Honor* is an English Catholic with a long genealogy named Guy Crouchback. "Thirty-five years old, slight and trim," Guy, when we meet him, is saying his farewell to a parish church in the fictional town of St. Dulcina delle Rocce, near his family's Italian villa. The old church houses the bones of "St. Dulcina," "reputedly a victim of Diocletian." It also shelters the remains of a soldier. The narrator describes Guy contemplating the inscription and effigy belonging to the tomb of this symbolic figure: "Roger of Waybroke, Knight, an Englishman; his arms five falcons. His sword and one gauntlet still lay beside him." Roger of Waybroke, with whom Guy feels "an especial kinship," lived an anticlimactic life. He never fulfilled his quest to fight the Turk in Jerusalem. Instead, he fell in a minor battle in Italy and was adopted by the locals as "il Santo Inglese." The Spanish critics who accuse their English counterparts of bias may have a point: to the best of my knowledge, no one has noticed the connection between the fictional St. Dulcina and Dulcinea of Toboso, and no one has connected the lost knight-errant to Don Quixote—but there they are, radiating symbolism at the start.

Both Waugh and Cervantes are masters of extended dialogue. In this way they reinforce their panoramic, external perspectives (which extend in Waugh to the surreal), where the body and its follies can compete with the mind and its illusions. Guy is

more fool than madman, and more romantic than fool. The chief candidate for Sancho is Apthorpe, a fellow officer whose obsession with his ridiculous “thunder-box” (a portable latrine) calls to mind Sancho’s digestive hijinks—especially when it explodes with Apthorpe sitting on it. The swashbuckling enters through colorfully drawn military figures like Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook and the members of “Hookforce.” A good chunk of *Sword of Honor* takes place in and around the Mediterranean, giving it a multiethnic density in line with Cervantes’ Spain. And when, near the end of the novel, Guy works on saving a Jewish community in Yugoslavia, we are reminded of Cervantes’ heartfelt attention to the plight of the Moriscos.

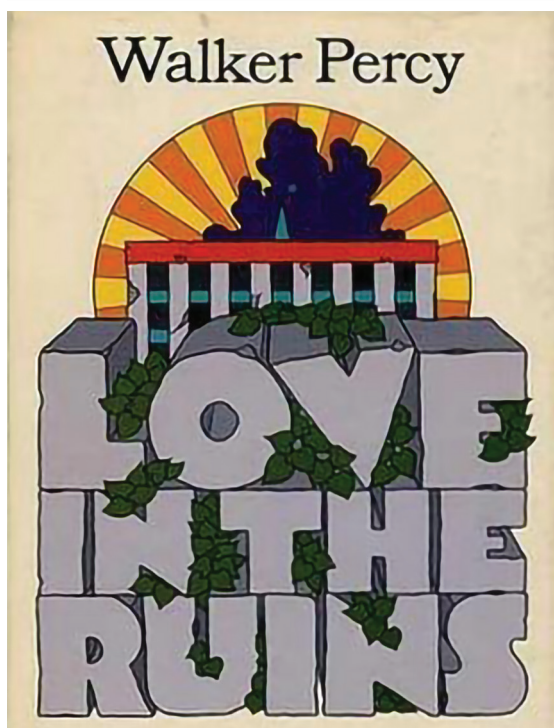
A BAD CATHOLIC

To keep things within workable bounds, I want to seize on one aspect of Walker Percy’s prophetic satire of 1971, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. As the narrator and wise fool of the novel, Dr. Tom More makes a crucial diagnosis: “it’s the soul of Western man that is in the very act of flying apart HERE and

now.” Doc More knows this because he has scientific evidence of the mind’s divorce from the body. He has invented a machine called “More’s Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer,” which measures the extent of an individual’s fall from himself, in the direction of angelic detachment or bestial self-indulgence. Cervantes had foreseen this situation in the complementarity of Don Quixote and Sancho, but Cervantes’ knight and squire remain loyal to each other. In More’s post-apocalyptic New Orleans, loyalty is practically nonexistent. It follows that New Orleans’ multiethnic culture is breaking down into its constituent parts, which are violently at odds.

Doc More sticks to a first-person viewpoint, symptomatic of social atomization, but he also offers shrewd psychological studies of his patients. In fact, he is a part-time mental patient himself. Toward the end, after the climactic success of his prayer against his devilish antagonist (“Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence”), More finds an Edenic happiness: “I am Robinson Crusoe set down on the best possible island with a library, a laboratory, a lusty Presbyterian wife, a cozy tree house, an idea, and all the time in the world.” This reference to Robinson Crusoe (and a “lusty Presbyterian wife”) in a Catholic novel is striking. Percy was burdened by an acute consciousness of history. His protagonist is, pointedly enough, the namesake of Sir Thomas More, knight, dedicatee of *The Praise of Folly*, author of *Utopia* (1516), and Catholic martyr of conscience. At one point, Doc More places himself and his namesake in the select company of Cervantes and those who “do their best work in prison or exile.” St. Thomas More’s miraculous intercession saves this Catholic novel, and yet Doc More goes on to liken himself to the hero

First edition cover of Percy’s *Love in the Ruins*



“
**DOC MORE STICKS
TO A FIRST-PERSON
VIEWPOINT,
SYMPTOMATIC OF
SOCIAL ATOMIZATION.**
”



John Kennedy Toole (1937–1969)

of the first Protestant novel. This is Percy's game: the healing combination of Catholic and Protestant parallels what Doc More wanted to accomplish through his lapsometer's diagnoses. Further, this healing process is also evident in Doc More's attempt to fuse external and internal (or psychological) perspectives. Waugh likewise paid close attention to the mutual health of mind and body, but in Percy's novel the problem is widespread and desperate.

A HUGE KOOK

If the swashbuckling in *Love in the Ruins*, like its sexual mores, suggests the male ethos of '70s action stars, *A Confederacy of Dunces* performs its swashbuckling in the guise of a hot dog vendor wearing a pirate's costume and brandishing a "black plastic cutlass." Sergeant John Kennedy Toole probably completed the novel as we know it while stationed at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, in the summer of 1963. Toole's now-immortal Ignatius J. Reilly is Quixote and Sancho combined, the knight's sallet helmet replaced by a "green hunting cap," and Sancho absorbed into a cartoon colossus whose mind and body enjoy no equilibrium. I take the name Ignatius to be an ironic reference, though not a hostile one, to St. Ignatius of Loyola, a kind of Quixote in his own right. That Toole captured the magic of New Orleans while situating Ignatius in a third-person narration is a miracle of art, conceived and constructed by genius but founded on scholarship that is still largely unrecognized. And though Ignatius is a "huge kook" who barely manages to escape the mental hospital, he is also, as the vehicle of Toole's satire, an intellectual

champion of the Middle Ages and a well-armed critic of modernity. A parodic knight-errant, he is a would-be resolver of the "crises of our times," who can be stunningly adroit in his critique of cause-mongering, inane politics, and social pathologies, a class of affairs he wisely assigns to a lack of contact with reality. He is at war with another modern-day Quixote, his love interest, Myrna Minkoff, a sexually liberated Freudian Jew questing in the name of avant-garde liberalism. His hilarious "Journal of a Working Boy" shifts the novel to first-person narration, as do letters between Ignatius and Myrna. Behind his antic genius and comic mimicry of New Orleans types, Toole, like Waugh and Percy, reveals an anthropological concern with balancing the social and individual nature of humanity.

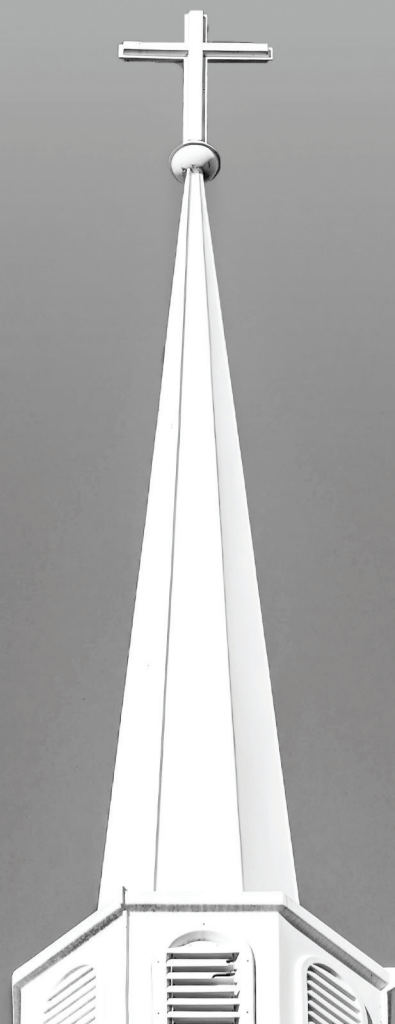
CERVANTES' LEGACY TODAY

By now you are wondering, what of the Catholic novel in more recent times? What survives of the Cervantine spirit that inspired Chesterton, Waugh, Percy, and Toole? Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote* (1982) resurrects Don Quixote in post-Franco Spain as a goodhearted priest who prefers pastoral to moral theology, and who has the wit to find good and bad on both sides of the Civil War. *Monsignor Quixote* is a fine work, superbly crafted, but too didactic to channel the Cervantine spirit. More recently still, Trevor Merrill's debut novel *Minor Indignities* (2020) observes the sexual and cultural lunacy rampant at Yale College in the 1990s. Merrill is a scrupulous wordsmith who resembles Updike in his absorption of French masters and Tom Wolfe in his critique of the campus scene. It seems fair to place his work in the reactionary movement against postmodern irony (itself an academic habit of mind) that marches under the banner of the New Sincerity. I admire *Minor Indignities*, as well I should, but its first-person narration succumbs at times to introspective overkill. Merrill will need more narrative invention, and he will need to escape the mind's constant dialogue with itself, if he is to help revive the tradition of Cervantes. **RL**

Lee Oser is professor of English at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. He is a former president of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW). His most recent books are Christian Humanism in Shakespeare: A Study in Religion and Old Enemies: A Satire.

THE GODS OF THE CITY

by JOHN G. GROVE



Photos by Michael-Tatman / iStock and sborisov / iStock

There have been calls recently for a more robust infusion of religion, particularly some form of Christianity, into the body politic and public policies. But we've been down this road before. A confusion of state and church results in neither doing its job well.





Josh Hammer speaking at CPAC Hungary 2023

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NATIONAL CONSERVATISM’S STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES, released in 2022, generated a flurry of interesting conservative writing on the relationship between religion and public life thanks to its robust endorsement of a “public religion.” And since that time, several books and articles have been published by people sympathetic to the national conservative movement embracing the “Christian nationalism” identifier initially employed as an epithet from the left.

Descriptions of this public religion differ from author to author, but most accounts argue that there is a distinct American identity structured at

least in part around Christianity or Protestantism and its “moral vision” (to use the Statement’s language). Moreover, government ought to take an active role in promoting and (since it has decayed over the years) reviving this American religion. This might mean laws that encourage church attendance or punish blasphemy. But advocates mostly focus on political rhetoric, symbolism, and religious content in public education and government institutions.

The plurality of American Christian denominations is unavoidable, of course, so most of these calls (exempting the distinctive and politically marginal Catholic integralists) are not aimed at promoting a particular church but rather Christianity or Protestantism broadly construed. Yoram Hazony, in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, argues that “the traditional religion (or religions) of the nation” is to be favored; Josh Hammer has similarly spoken of “ecumenical integralism.” And Christian proponents will generally refer broadly to a Christian or Protestant cultural foundation. Without getting into too many theological details, they argue, our politics needs more God-talk.

One of the most common defenses of this vision is historical—pointing back to American origins and the European Protestant experience that forms the context of early American political and religious life. Religion and politics were never entirely separate during this time, with dynamic interconnections in just about every Christian country. The modern expectation of religious neutrality on the part of the state is a new phenomenon. In fact, many often argue, such a separation is impossible in that the state will always have some religious or quasi-religious preferences that will be reflected in law and policy—why not make them our own?

But in more ways than one, the devil is in the details. Big-picture talk of public religion avoids the question



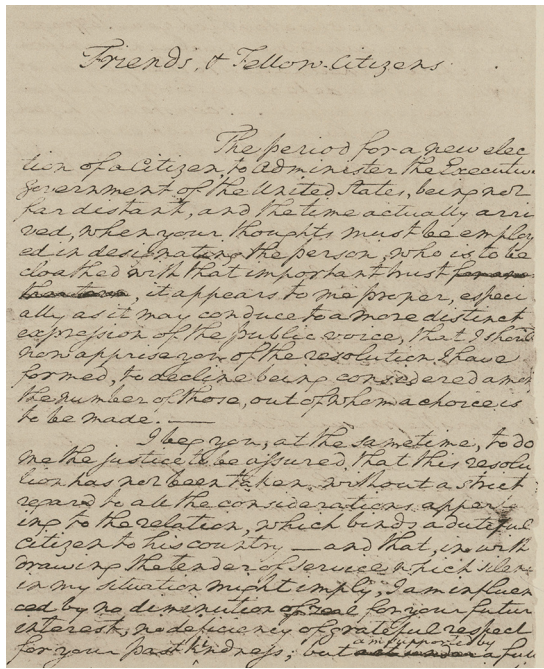
Depiction of the 1530 Augsburg Confession by an unknown artist

of the particular tasks of church and state and the value of each performing what is distinctive to it. The most common complaint against “Christian nationalist” public religion is that it is a threat to the American political system. But a quick glance at history would show that American democracy is more than capable of handling a public “Christianity.” The real danger is what American democracy does to the faith.

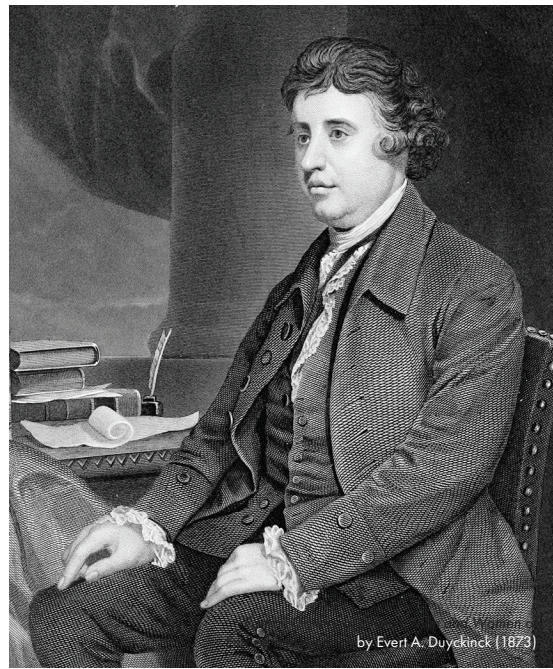
THE STATE CHURCH

For centuries after the Reformation, when government sought to promote Christianity, it did so by the legal establishment of a specific church with a specific confession. To 21st-century eyes, establishment seems like the complete mixing of politics and faith. But that is not entirely the case. For all

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**THE MODERN
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 ”



The first page of Washington's Farewell Address (1796)



Edmund Burke (1729–1797)

the many overlaps, the establishments were clearly *not* intended to challenge a fundamental principle of Protestant church-state teaching: that the task of the Church and the task of civil government were very different, and that the two, in the words of the Augsburg Confession, “must not be confounded.” The Church’s proper task was not the direction of earthly kingdoms but the preaching of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments. The civil government’s task was not to teach the scriptures or provide spiritual fulfillment, but to promote peace and good social order. This distinction of tasks was meant to be an assurance that the gospel would not be corrupted either by political rulers with ulterior motives or by a church distracted by the pursuit of temporal power.

The traditional establishment was, in one sense, the recognition by the state of an *earthly* source of authority outside itself and submission to it within its rightful sphere. The established church was a specific institution that could, practically speaking, be treated as “the Church” for national purposes (with carve-outs and exceptions possible for dissenters). So the confessional state could be seen as distinctively Christian while remaining in its prescribed role in part because it was not pledging itself merely to furthering a generic idea—an abstract

“Christianity”—but to this specific institution with its specific confession and its clergy to defend it.

The prince, king, or government more broadly could symbolically support the established church, contribute public money to its coffers, tie legal rights and privileges to membership, and in some cases even play a role in elevating bishops. But such responsibilities could be understood as dealing with externals. The established church itself was still the authority tasked with teaching and maintaining the substantive content of the faith. The state, it was thought, would reap the side effects of a faithful and religious people and could support the church insofar as its strength was seen as important to civil peace, public morals, and unity.

It was this essential distinction of tasks that could allow someone like Edmund Burke to simultaneously affirm that “religion is the basis of civil society”—and even speak of a “consecrated state”—while still maintaining that “politics and the pulpit are terms that have little agreement.” It was the “confusion of duties” that was most to be avoided.

To be sure, the established churches certainly offered plenty of opportunities for confusion, and much civil involvement in the national churches was countenanced through incredibly subtle distinctions; it cannot be said that the separation of tasks was

always maintained in practice. And the present state of just about every established church in the world today shows that it was hardly a bulwark against an encroaching modern liberalism. But at least in theory, the arrangement left the substance of the Christian gospel in the hands of the Church.

The possibility of this sort of straightforward establishment in America was short-lived and localized. There was never the kind of religious unity that could have allowed for a distinctly American identity to form around a specific national church, and the establishments that existed locally were, as religious diversity rapidly increased, quickly transformed into moderate, “quasi-establishments” that legally favored and rhetorically utilized Protestantism or Christianity writ large. These, in turn, eventually gave way to a system of official neutrality among sects, but robust religious political rhetoric that presented Christianity as an essential aid to public morality and national identity, along the lines of Washington’s Farewell Address. Political figures continued to invoke God; activists sought to fit their programs into biblical moral categories (or extra-biblical

providential frameworks); public school children recited prayers and learned Bible verses; government bodies opened with invocations.

This sort of lighter religious politics—without any particular confession—seems to be what most of the mainstream national conservatives today would like to return to. And their accounts of history sometimes downplay the difference between traditional establishment and the lighter, more generic promotion of religion, treating them all simply as evidence of a Christian public identity.

But that distinction is vital. The logic and history of this blending of Christianity and politics show that it tends to render the content of the faith a blank canvas on which politicians may ply their trade.

ESTABLISHMENT WITHOUT A CONFESSION?

Two realities of American life are critical when considering the likely tendencies of the political promotion of some form of “common” Christianity: mass democracy and sectarian variety. Aside from

A virtual presidential inaugural prayer service at the White House on January 21, 2021



Photo by Adam Schultz / The White House



Photo courtesy Hum Historical / Alamy

Public school children saying grace before lunch (1936)

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**DIVISIVE OR POLITICALLY
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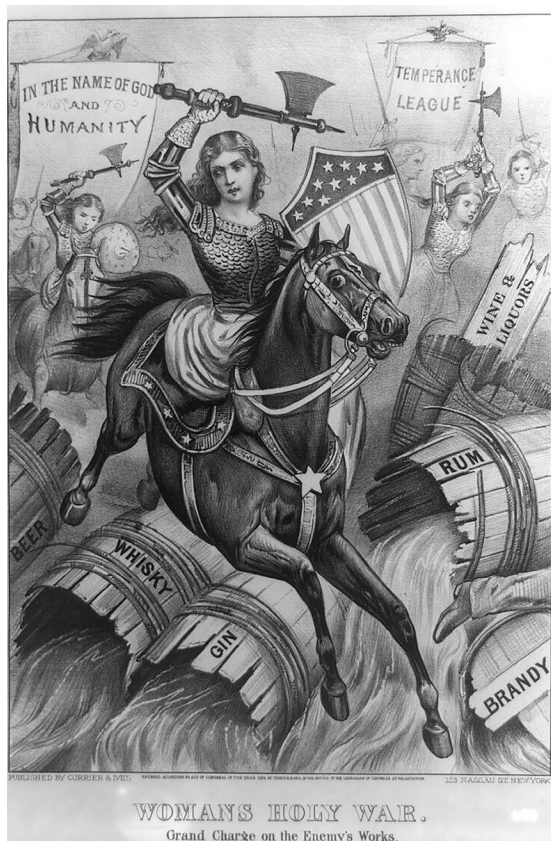
some occasional online LARPing about an “American Caesar,” few NatCons seem to have any intention of or plan for changing these realities. Given their existence, establishment-lite, without any particular church or confession, takes away almost all possibility that the vital distinction of tasks between church and state will hold in the public—or the Christian—mind. In the absence of any specific church committed to upholding its specific confession and defending itself against corruptions, public religion will inevitably emerge as a kind of synthesis faith formed around the political needs and ambitions of the moment. It might take more traditional or more progressive forms depending on who is using it, but it will be oriented toward political rather than spiritual aims.

Any consciously formed public religion—one that does not emerge from genuine religious unity on

fundamentals of the faith but rather from planned public messaging—would be part of a mass political movement and subject to all the incentives at work on such movements. It would have to start with a lowest common denominator: at best, public Christianity would consist simply of whatever is shared by those who identify as Christians (or, if we’re talking about movement conservatism, those who identify as conservative Christians). Divisive or politically inconvenient doctrines must be downplayed in favor of those inclusive enough to sustain a political coalition.

Because it has explicitly political aims (the creation or maintenance of a *national* identity), this public doctrine would almost certainly be heavily moralistic, focusing on the duties and obligations each has to the collective, or telling us which moral issues “values voters” ought to be most interested in. (Think Prohibition.) Mass political movements seeking to mobilize collective action have little use for the idea that we are made closer to God through faith in Christ rather than through righteous social crusades.

Pro-Prohibition political cartoon by Currier & Ives (1874)



And of course, any religion specifically expected to create political unity would naturally place political movements, parties, or nations, rather than the Church, at the center of God’s work on earth.

This generic, moralistic version of Christianity, then, would stand as an alternative to creedal, dogmatic, confessional Christianity. It would be a synthesis faith that could cut across sectarian lines, and the incentives of mass democracy would mold it to fit political needs. Like many quasi-religious ideologies on offer, it would claim to fulfill our spiritual longings by channeling it into partisan activity. But unlike other political ideologies and nationalist visions, it would vocally claim the mantle of Christianity. As C.S. Lewis observed in his “Meditation on the Third Commandment”: “The demon inherent in every party is at all times ready enough to disguise himself as the Holy Ghost.”

In contemporary circumstances, a consciously manufactured public religion would therefore do the opposite of what the old establishments in theory aimed at: rather than point subjects to a stable, orthodox Church as guardian of religious truth, hoping merely to glean the beneficial side effects of genuine religious unity, it would appeal to citizens with a contrived political gospel masquerading as Christianity. And given America’s sectarian diversity, this political gospel—preached from state capitols, debate stages, talk shows, and government schools—would have a far more prominent and influential platform than any given church that was mostly focused on the eternal souls of those in its pews. To the extent that such a public religion is pervasive and influential, the churches would have every incentive to conform their messages to it. The state would not be supporting “the Church” as a source of truth that transcends our earthly politics, but rather the many American churches would be led along by the politicians.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

If one needs evidence of the likelihood of this scenario, he need only look at American history. The era of nonsectarian “American Christianity” to which today’s conservatives seem to appeal was not a long, stable period of Christian orthodoxy. As Mark Noll has documented, the distinctively American Christianity that cut across denominational differences and appealed to a simply “Christian” or “Protestant” nation wound up taking on the characteristics of the political principles around it, mixing

civic virtue with the righteousness of Christ; it was directed toward partisan and national aims; and it steadily marched away from orthodoxy. Even at the time of the Revolution, many appeals to “true religion” consciously papered over points of contention (i.e., fundamental questions of the faith including baptism, the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, and the nature of God’s grace to his people) in favor of public morals. The spiritual concept of “Christian liberty” was conflated with civic liberty; invocations of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost gave way to appeals to “the divine being.”

As the 19th century advanced, a decidedly political faith took clearer shape. America—rather than the Church—became the “City on a Hill”; a new “social gospel” defined righteousness not by faith in Christ but by crusading for this or that social outcome; public education taught a safe, moral faith stripped of divisive dogmas that Christians of the past had been willing to die for; the spread of liberty, democracy, and American armies was heralded as the spread of Christ’s kingdom; millenarian nonsense was propagated as support for a Messianic American Cause. There was no shortage of God-talk in public life, but it helped push American churches and their members further away from traditional Christian faith and toward a vague, spiritualized civic moralism.

Though the 20th century saw a salutary, orthodox revival against certain elements of the social gospel movement, American political Christianity showed little signs of reestablishing a firm distinction between a set-apart Church focused on spiritual goods and the civil questions of the city of man. Most public religion—from lofty presidential rhetoric to the daily recitations in public schools—amounted to

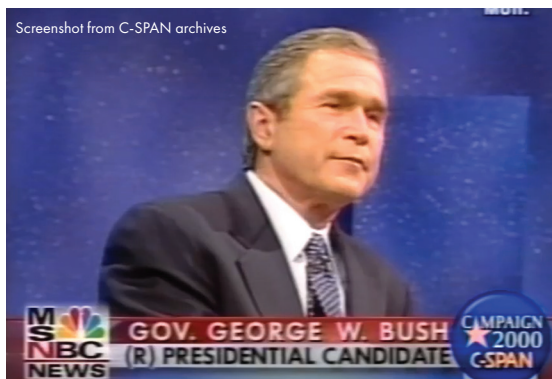
little more than vague invocations of the Deity, who is recognized as important in some way and expected to bless whatever the present public endeavors happen to be. Unlike Christ’s description of the gospel in Matthew 10, this was a religion specifically crafted to please everyone.

The school prayer at issue in *Engel v. Vitale* is one such example: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country.” There is nothing objectionable, but neither is there anything particularly Christian to it. If the NatCons are right, and hold as Hazony does in *Conservatism*, that government strengthens the things that it honors and weakens the things that it does not, we must ask ourselves whether such rhetoric merely honors the gods of the city. And this is why (as D.G. Hart has outlined in *A Secular Faith* and *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*) Catholics and some confessional Protestants were resistant to or at best unenthusiastic about public school prayer and Bible reading. To them, this was not Christian education.

The rise of the “religious right,” moreover, showed that the conflation of spiritual and political goods was not the exclusive purview of liberal Christianity. From the appropriation of practices like the laying on of hands (traditionally a sign of the spiritual setting apart done at ordinations or baptisms) for political candidates, to its susceptibility to millenarian theories about America’s Middle East policy, the movement weaved together Christianity’s spiritual promises with the drive for temporal power. Their moral teachings may have been more conservative, but like the progressives of a different era, they focused much of their attention on an attempt to build a kingdom of this world. When George W. Bush identified Jesus Christ as his favorite “political philosopher” in a 1999 presidential debate, it generated plenty of discussion about cultural divisions, but few asked what it indicated about how American evangelical Christianity presented Christ and the nature of his work.

It’s easy enough to say that this is not the kind of public Christianity that the NatCons are proposing. But the content of any public religion would not be determined by the sincerely faithful think-tankers and pundits who promote the concept. There is no “Christian prince” immune from the influence of mass political movements, and there is no unified national church that could keep the public mind tethered to the fundamentals of the true faith. When politicians or public institutions engage in God-talk,

George W. Bush at the December 1999 presidential debate, Iowa





Yoram Hazony

it will be the kind of God-talk people want to hear, whatever that may be.

Moreover, religious indifferentism is already barely hidden in some NatCon writings. In *Conservatism*, Hazony—an Orthodox Jew who supports a Protestant public religion for America—rather explicitly elevates “a conservative life” over the pursuit of religious truth: “It is obvious that an individual who wishes to embark on a conservative life can do so most easily by taking up the tradition handed down for many generations within his own family, tribe, and nation. This is the way of the human soul, which seeks repentance by returning to the God of his own family.” Likewise, the NatCon Statement of Principles promotes the reading of the Bible “as the first among the sources of a shared Western civilization” and “the rightful inheritance of believers and non-believers alike.” As Dan Hugger observed in the Spring 2023 issue of this magazine, “The Bible as national text is a strange category, somewhat more than literature to be appreciated but a great deal less than the Word of God.”

A social life that results from a genuine shared faith is desirable but cannot be manufactured by a national political movement. Anyone concerned with the maintenance of Christian orthodoxy cannot simply desire more public God-talk without

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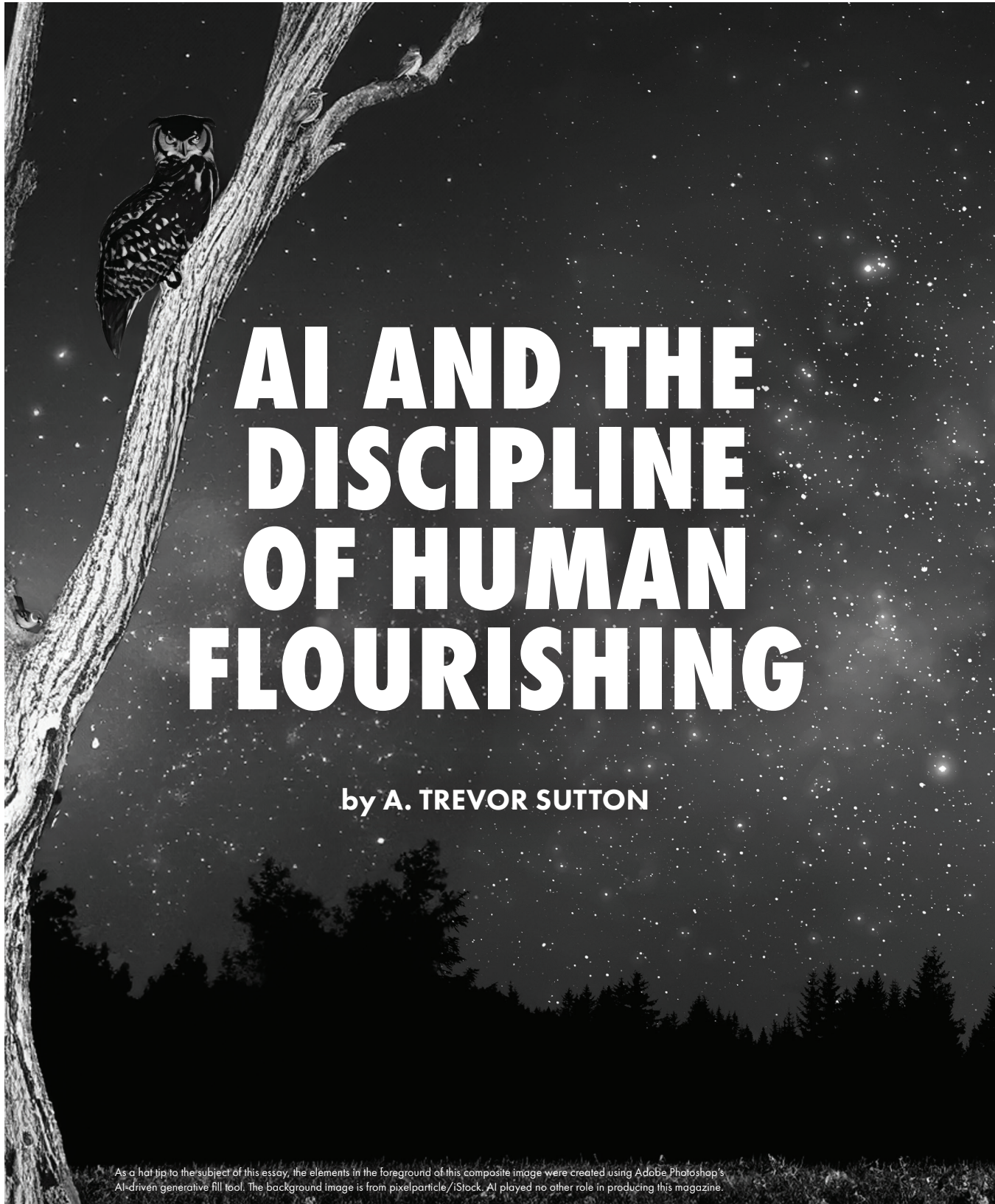
SECTARIAN DIVERSITY AND THE FORCES OF MASS DEMOCRACY ARE REALITIES OF AMERICAN LIFE.

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some reason to believe it would be spiritually—not merely politically—edifying. While the NatCons and Christian nationalists are correct to observe that separation has not been the historical norm, we don’t live in 16th-century Saxony or Elizabethan England. The Christian churches have existed and adjusted to all manner of political and social circumstances. In states with a high level of religious unity (and a non-democratic politics), a formal establishment allowed in theory for the possibility of a linkage between church and state without the substance of religion turning into mere political pottage. But those examples are no longer relevant in present circumstances. Sectarian diversity and the forces of mass democracy are realities of American life, and robust religious liberty paired with a nonsectarian state is more beneficial to the task of the Church than a spiritually infused civil morality.

To be sure, governments of modern mass democracies seem programmed to push beyond their proper task and encourage citizens to find spiritual fulfillment in the demands and promises of the collective. In this sense, there is a degree of truth to the NatCon claim that there will always be some form of public religion. But whether directed more by conservatives or more by progressives, this sort of public faith that emerges from the politics of the modern nation-state will always be a human concoction, and it will always be the responsibility of the Church to call out such pretensions as it does all false gods. **RL**


John G. Grove is managing editor of Law & Liberty and previously taught political science at Lincoln Memorial University.



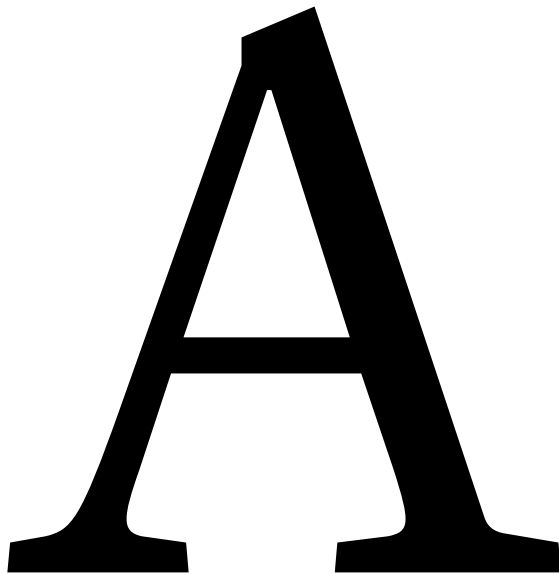
AI AND THE DISCIPLINE OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

by A. TREVOR SUTTON

As a hat tip to the subject of this essay, the elements in the foreground of this composite image were created using Adobe Photoshop's AI-driven generative fill tool. The background image is from pixelparticle/iStock. AI played no other role in producing this magazine.

A composite image featuring a starry night sky, a violin and bow, a telescope, a large white bird in flight, and a white rabbit in a field.

**Is artificial intelligence an aid
or a threat to humanity? It all
depends on whether it works
with us or instead of us.**



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IS for the birds. Or at least that’s what the preamble to the “Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights” seems to suggest. Prepared in October 2022 under the auspices of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, this statement begins with an accusation against artificial intelligence (AI): “Among the great challenges posed to democracy today is the use of technology, data, and automated systems in ways that threaten the rights of the American public.”

Meanwhile, the American public is already using AI on a daily basis. Although it may seem futuristic and complex, AI is essentially a machine capable

of performing a task that would otherwise require human intelligence. Ordinary consumer products such as Siri, Alexa, and Google are all examples of AI. You use AI for depositing a check with a banking app or using the speech-to-text function to send a text message. Yet AI goes beyond these ordinary consumer products to include innovations such as facial recognition, brain-implanted computer chips, and content-creating generative AI.

According to this AI Bill of Rights, AI poses many threats to society, which include latent biases, breaches of privacy, and violations against humanity as a result of rendering false information. After declaring American independence from AI, the statement proposes ways to mitigate these threats through the responsible design and use of this technology. This includes proposals for safe and effective systems, protections against algorithmic discrimination, and human alternatives and safeguards.

Similar policy is being enacted by the European Union. The European Commission is seeking to regulate this technology through the AI Act, a proposal for categorizing various AI systems. The AI Act would establish various categories of AI ranging from unacceptable risk, high risk, limited risk, or minimal risk. It would ban AI systems that pose such unacceptable

First physical magazine cover created by AI



NICK BOSTROM

SUPERINTELLIGENCE

Paths, Dangers, Strategies



Superintelligence by Nick Bostrom, published in 2014

risks as social scoring systems and facial recognition. It would tightly regulate high-risk AI systems like robot-assisted surgery and computer verification of travel documents. And limited or minimal risk AI systems ranging from chatbots to spam filters would have minimal or no regulations. While it has already been years in the works, the AI Act will not take effect until 2025 at the earliest.

This gaggle of new policies seeking to regulate AI comes as the result of major new developments in this technology. Over six decades ago, computer scientists began hatching ideas for offloading human intelligence onto machines. Now this fledgling field has soared to new heights—especially with a new class of AI known as generative AI.

Generative AI uses machine learning to create new content such as text, images, videos, and sounds. Popular examples of generative AI applications include ChatGPT, Google’s Bard, Dall-E, and Murf. As more people use generative AI applications, this technology is now everywhere—work, school, home, and church.

This article will not argue that artificial intelligence is for the birds, however. Treating AI like an albatross that must be banned is not a tenable path forward for society. Rather, this article will explore how the increase of AI—and generative AI

in particular—raises the stakes for humans to build countervailing disciplines, skills, and communities. A robust human flourishing must counterbalance the rise of machine learning.

SPARROWS, OWLS, AND SUPERCOMPUTERS

Nick Bostrom, director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, offers an ornithological parable in his book *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Bostrom’s unfinished parable of the sparrows goes like this: Several sparrows are hard at work building their nests. After days of long and tiresome work, they begin to lament about how small and weak they are. Then one of them has an idea: “What if we had an owl who could help us build our nests?” This idea generates excitement about other ways that an owl could be useful to the sparrows. It could look after the young and elderly. It could offer advice. It could guard against the neighborhood cat.

With great enthusiasm, they embark on finding an abandoned owlet or an unhatched owl egg. But a surly sparrow named Scronkfinkle warns that baby owls become big owls. He argues that they should first learn the art of owl taming before bringing an owl into their nest. Several others object to this warning on the basis that simply finding an owl egg would be more than enough work. These sparrows decide to begin by getting a baby owl—and then afterward they would consider the challenge of taming it. With unbridled excitement, they venture off to find a baby owl.

Meanwhile, only a few sparrows remain in the nest to begin the work of figuring out how sparrows might tame an owl.



GENERATIVE AI USES MACHINE LEARNING TO CREATE NEW CONTENT SUCH AS TEXT, IMAGES, VIDEOS, AND SOUNDS.



As with most parables, this story is about more than sparrows and owls. Bostrom offers this unfinished parable as a way to think about the risks of bringing superintelligence such as AI into our midst. Humanity is the sparrows; machine learning is the owl.

How does the parable end? In the absence of a conclusion, one must guess what happens to the sparrows. The most gruesome—and unimaginative—ending to the parable is that the owl hatches and eats all the sparrows. For our technological society, this is the notion of an impending AI apocalypse.

Might there be another possible ending to this parable? Suppose it ends like this: The owl hatches and does not eat the sparrows. By living with the sparrows, the owl begins to act and think like a sparrow. Instead of eating the sparrows, the owl learns the sparrow art of nest-building and food-gathering. As more skills and practices shift from the sparrows to the owl, the former get weaker and the latter gets stronger. The only perceptible change is that the sparrows forget the feel of twigs, the air and lift of flight. The adventure of avoiding predators subsides for the sparrows. The craft and technique of nest-making moves from the sparrows to the domain of owls.

A less obvious—but still tragic—ending to this parable is that the owl leads to weaker sparrows with diminished abilities and atrophied discipline, skill, and community. Generative AI will do the same to us unless we pair it with a robust human flourishing.

IS GENERATIVE AI A THREAT TO HUMANITY?

Not unlike this parable, generative AI is like an eager young owl ready and willing to serve us. Consumer applications such as ChatGPT and Google's Bard offer immediate benefits. Yet these powerful devices nevertheless can be deleterious to human users.

The most immediate benefit of generative AI is its ability to complete time-consuming tasks. Generative AI applications can create a detailed travel itinerary based on a set of prompts supplied by a user. Or a homeowner can use these applications to draft an email to a contractor requesting a quote for a household project. Generative AI can write and debug computer programs, create business pitches, and translate text into different languages. These are just a few of the immediate benefits that come from this emerging technology.

How does generative AI work? Generative AI is part of a new field of AI known as large language

models. Drawing on previous iterations of AI, this new paradigm uses something called “foundation models.” Massive amounts of data serve as the foundation for machine learning. Generative AI is a supercomputer fed with terabytes of data in the form of words, language, and text—hence the “large” in large language models. While owls feed upon worms and mice, large language models feed upon language data scraped from the internet.

The computer takes all this data, analyzes it, and organizes it into categories and connections called neural networks. The supercomputer uses these neural networks to solve language problems such as text classification, question answering, document summarization, and text generation. Generative AI functions like a very sophisticated autocomplete or chatbot. This technology uses machine learning to “chat” cogent responses to our questions or prompts.

This basic overview of generative AI allows us to pursue the question at the heart of this article: How might this pose a threat to humanity? Like the sparrows in the fable, generative AI can weaken human discipline, skill, and community. This emerging technology has the power to undermine human flourishing. The more that humans rely on this technology, the greater the risk of atrophy. Without any counterbalances, generative AI will weaken the human capacity for composing literature, poetry, music, and computer programs. This technology can diminish human hermeneutical skills such as literary interpretation or judicial decision-making. As human reliance on these devices increases, the unaided human capacity to compose, interpret, and think may decrease.



GENERATIVE AI MAY EMPOWER HUMANS TO PURSUE NEW HEIGHTS OF KNOWLEDGE BY FREEING THEM FROM MONOTONOUS TASKS.

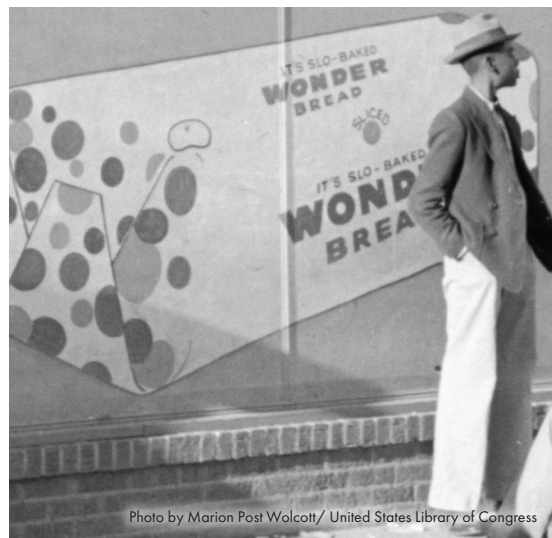




Pres. Jimmy Carter and his daughter Amy participating in a speed reading course (1977)

For example, ChatGPT can create a literature review summarizing books and articles on a particular subject. With owl-like speed, this generative AI application can read, digest, and regurgitate a wealth of information on a given topic. This technology surpasses human speed-reading abilities. As humans offload the work of literature reviews to supercomputers, our skills and abilities in this regard will atrophy. Reading large amounts of text, organizing it into themes, and summarizing the main points will become an antiquated practice. In this regard, generative AI may empower humans to pursue new heights of knowledge by freeing them from monotonous tasks. On the other hand, the owl-like speed of this technology does not necessarily include wisdom or truth. It may thrust us into a “post-truth” future in which we are awash in facts and information but lack guides for what is true or wise.

There are other furtive dangers in losing the human capacity to do this sort of work. Humans will come to depend on these tools for help with composition, interpretation, and translation. Humans will still be able to compose but only with the help of Google’s Bard. Humans will still be able to interpret but only with ChatGPT to do the heavy lifting. Humans will still be able to translate but only with the assistance of Google Translate. These powerful devices make us simultaneously smarter and dumber, stronger and weaker, more human and less human. We will be able to soar to new heights, yet only with



Mural advertising Wonder Bread on Beale Street in Memphis (1939)

the aid of these tools. But like the bird-man Icarus, it all comes crashing down if our artificial tools fail us.

Generative AI, however, is not alone in posing this threat to humanity. It’s already part of a long line of devices eroding human skills, discipline, and community. Before generative AI, smartphone apps, for example, were already helping us navigate roadways and augmenting our view of the nighttime sky. While this technology has provided immediate benefits to travelers and stargazers, it has also incapacitated our ability to determine cardinal directions or find Polaris amid a sea of stars. For that matter, long before generative AI or phone apps, mass-produced Wonder Bread liberated humanity from the toil of endless baking. This development was the best thing since sliced bread, but it brought a profound cooling to the home hearth and the practice of breadmaking. As society progresses with supercomputers, smartphones, and other technological developments, we regress into a state where we cannot write or think, navigate or bake our own bread, without the help of devices.

DEVICES, FOCAL THINGS, AND COUNTERBALANCES

Long before the advent of generative AI, Albert Borgmann was writing about technological devices. Borgmann is a recently deceased philosophy of technology scholar. In his book *Technology and the*



Wood-burning kitchen stove in a log cabin at Grey Roots, Ontario

Character of Contemporary Life, Borgmann argued that technology has shaped contemporary life around its peculiar pattern. Borgmann suggested that the pattern of technology becomes particularly harmful when there are no means by which one can “prune back the excesses of technology and restrict it to a supporting role.”

Borgmann makes a distinction between “focal things” and “devices.” A focal thing requires focus, skill, bodily and social engagement, and context. According to Borgmann, a focal thing is “inseparable from its context, namely its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement. The experience of a thing is always and also a bodily and social engagement with the thing’s world. In calling forth a manifold engagement, a thing necessarily provides more than one commodity.”

A wood-burning stove is a focal thing: it requires skill and bodily engagement through woodcutting, seasoning wood, and fire building. This thing exists within a context of forest, home, family, and community. It leads to social engagement and focus as multiple people contribute to the process and becomes a focal point in the home.

A device stands in stark contrast to a focal thing. Devices make no demands of skill, strength, or attention. Devices provide commodities for enjoyment without encumbrance or context. The lack of

encumbrance makes the commodious consumption of devices thoughtless and disposable. Technological devices produce a commodity without burdening us in any way. Devices are quick, easy, foolproof, and safe. A furnace or central-heating system is a device. These devices provide warmth without any demand from the recipient. ChatGPT is also an example of a device. This device provides a commodity—summaries, essays, answers—without any skill, preparation, or demand on the user.

Things require skilled and active human engagement; devices require no focus, engagement, or context. Things require practice; devices invite consumption. Things constitute commanding reality; devices procure disposable reality. Although technological devices ostensibly liberate humanity from toil, poverty, and suffering, this liberation comes with disengagement, distraction, commodification, and isolation. The move from things to devices—or from human creativity to generative AI—is not without consequence.

While devices such as ChatGPT and Google’s Bard make no demand of our skills, strength, or attention, focal things do. Focal things such as books, violins, paintbrushes, and fly-fishing rods demand our skills, strength, and attention. Focal things are concrete, tangible, and engaging entities that require a practice to prosper within: “It sponsors discipline and skill

which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body, and the world, of myself and others, and in a social union.”

Focal things are related to focal practices. Borgmann argues that corporate worship, table fellowship, reading aloud, and live music are a few of the focal practices that humans might pursue. Attending to these practices will foster discipline and skill, strength and attention, engagement and community.

Human flourishing and generative AI devices can coexist with the help of focal things and practices. Chatbot recipes need the counterbalance of human conversation and the culture of the table. Effortless AI summaries of *The Brothers Karamazov* must be matched with the human effort of listening to Dostoevsky read aloud. Artificially generated images that are a chimera of reality need equal attention to viewing human works of art or venturing outdoors. Living well in a world of chatbots and generative AI requires focal things and practices. Humans will need to pursue countervailing disciplines, skills, and communities. A robust human flourishing must counterbalance the rise of machine learning and generation.

A BIRD STORY WITH A DIFFERENT ENDING

Inviting artificial intelligence into our midst does not have to end in tragedy. The novel *Watership Down* by Richard Adams helps us imagine how superintelligence and flourishing can coexist. The novel tells the story of an intrepid group of rabbits displaced from their warren. As they embark on an adventure of survival, these rabbits conscript the help of a seagull named Kehaar.

When the rabbits meet Kehaar, he is recovering from an injury. They feed the bird and bring him into their makeshift warren. As the bird recovers and

prepares to leave, a rabbit named Hazel has an idea: What if the bird could search for other warrens and rabbits? Hazel shares his plan with the other rabbits, saying, “The bird will go and search for us!” One of the other rabbits, Blackberry, loves the idea and tells the others, “What a marvelous idea! That bird can find out in a day what we couldn’t discover for ourselves in a thousand!”

The rabbits enact their plan in a clever way. They hint to the bird that they have a predicament—a warren of buck rabbits without any does—and need help. Kehaar offers his power of flight as a way to help the rabbits search for other warrens. And so the rabbits partner with this bird in their adventure of survival.

Conscripting the help of this bird does not leave the rabbits weaker or with diminished abilities. This band of bunnies flourishes amid an adventure that requires discipline, skill, and community. The bird’s power does not create an effortless existence for the rabbits. The things and practices needed for rabbits to flourish balance the superintelligence of the bird. Although they employ the bird’s help, the rabbits continue their adventure of survival, which fosters discipline and skill, strength and attention, engagement and community.

AI is not simply for the birds. Rejecting this technology out of fear or a desire to preserve the status quo is untenable. Nevertheless, this technology can work against human flourishing and leave us weaker, dumber, and dependent. Flourishing in a world of chatbots will require us to live like rabbits, not sparrows. The sparrows in the unfinished parable seek an owl to work *for* them. The rabbits of *Watership Down* seek a seagull to work *with* them on their adventure of discipline, skill, and community. These are similar stories with very different endings.

How will our story end as we bring artificial intelligence into our nests and warrens, homes and schools, churches and communities? That all depends on how well we cultivate disciplines, skills, and communities as we venture into this brave new world. **RL**

“
**DEVICES MAKE
NO DEMANDS OF
SKILL, STRENGTH,
OR ATTENTION.**

”

A. Trevor Sutton is senior pastor at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Lansing, Mich., and earned his Ph.D. at Concordia Seminary. He also teaches and speaks on the topic of technology at conferences, universities, and seminaries. Sutton has written several books, including Redeeming Technology (cowritten with Brian Smith, M.D.) and Authentic Christianity (cowritten with Gene Edward Veith Jr.).

IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.: Seeking the Freedom to Choose the Good

by DAN HUGGER

EVERY CARDINAL DULLES, S.J., WAS the most influential American Catholic theologian of the 20th century. He was created a cardinal by Pope St. John Paul II early in the 21st century for precisely this reason. He was the first English-speaking theologian created cardinal without being a bishop since St. John Henry Newman. His family tree is littered with prominent American Presbyterian churchmen and statesmen. He held prominent academic posts throughout his long career and published 25 books and around 850 articles, yet he once confessed, “I don’t think my life lends itself to biography, since I have never done anything significant.” Greatness is rare in this world but rarer still is greatness so comfortably clothed in humility.

In the early days of the Acton Institute, Dulles, not yet a cardinal but merely a celebrated theologian, gave a lecture touching on the nature of freedom. He began, “To speak of freedom in an institute named for Lord Acton is like carrying coals to Newcastle.” The lecture was erudite and graced by wisdom ripened from lifelong meditation. He titled the lecture “Truth as the Ground of Freedom” and built it on the observation that “The rootedness of freedom in the truth has been a constant and central theme in the writings of John Paul II.” Dulles skillfully traced the theme from the Second Vatican Council through Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, but it was no mere

exercise in exegesis. Lord Acton, Mortimer Adler, Michael Polanyi, John Courtney Murray, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John Henry Newman, and Václav Havel are invoked as well, evidence of a long distillation in the thought life of Dulles himself.

During Dulles’ childhood and youth in the 1920s and 1930s, his father, John Foster Dulles, secretary of state throughout most of the Eisenhower administration, was involved in his share of controversies within the Presbyterian church. He defended liberal churchmen, including Harry Emerson Fosdick, in ecclesiastical courts where they faced charges of heresy. At issue in Fosdick’s case were his belief in such dogmas as the virgin birth, the resurrection of the body, and biblical inerrancy. Fosdick argued that differences of belief be tolerated within the church as an expression of Christian brotherhood and unity. John Foster Dulles defended him on procedural grounds, insisting that the Presbyterian General Assembly had no jurisdiction over the licensing of pastors, which was the right and duty of local presbyteries. Fosdick advocated absolute freedom of conscience, and John Foster Dulles secured his acquittal, arguing against arbitrary power. Both sidestepped the question of truth, however, illustrating Cardinal Dulles’ argument 70 years later that “a great rift exists between those who absolutize freedom and those who hold that true freedom can only be freedom in the truth.”

The question of freedom and truth would come to a head in Dulles’ freshman year at Harvard. The young Avery began his undergraduate career with an absolutist conception of freedom that quickly devolved into license. He frequently indulged in heavy drinking and late-night parties, and he chronically missed class. The culmination of these deleterious habits of life was a raucous night of excess in April of 1937. He and two college friends capped off their evening by stealing a taxi! They were subsequently arrested and

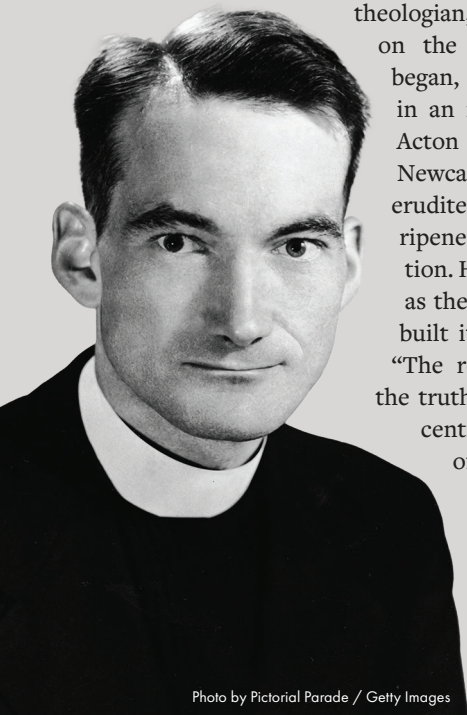


Photo by Pictorial Parade / Getty Images

spent the remainder of the weekend in jail. The incident resulted in the expulsion of his friends and disciplinary action for himself. Yet, later in life, Cardinal Dulles would claim, “Harvard made us Catholics.” Courses his freshman year in art, history, and literature fueled an awakening of religious sentiments and a new, more robust understanding of freedom beyond mere license, as he would later observe: “For the classical mind, freedom is not absolute. Human beings are free to act only in accord with what is truly good. In a sense, one is free only in one’s unhampered ability to choose the good. Morality, for the ancients, is in this sense not an external imposition but the truth that serves as a guide to action.”

The tale of Cardinal Avery Dulles’ conversion, the dialectical forces at Harvard that providentially led him to the knowledge of the truth that would make him free (John 8:32), would be told in *A Testimonial to Grace*, published in 1952. It was the second of what would be many books. (The first was his dissertation, for which he won the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Prize Essay for 1940.) Dulles published *A Testimonial to Grace* after a brief time studying at Harvard Law, a tour in the Navy, and his entrance into the Society of Jesus, where he would be ordained a priest in 1956. He would ultimately receive a doctorate in sacred theology in 1960 from the Gregorian University in Rome.

The remainder of his life was dedicated to his vocation as a theologian, serving on the faculty of Woodstock College, the Catholic University of America, and Fordham University. Visiting professorships abounded as well as leadership positions in professional associations and consultive work in ecumenical and ecclesial commissions. He published

through it all on every conceivable topic, including revelation, dogma, ecclesiology, ecumenicism, apologetics, and public theology.

And yet, Cardinal Dulles found himself out of place in the highly polarized church that followed the Second Vatican Council. In his comprehensive biography, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ: A Model Theologian, 1918–2008*, Patrick W. Carey describes Dulles’ whole theological project as a response to this polarization:

His models methodology, reflective of the post-conciliar theological pluralism, revealed his enduring concern to keep differing theological systems in a kind of dialectical tension that allowed the mystery of Christian faith to break forth in the limited perspectives of the various theological systems of thought.

Dulles was similarly dislocated in his appraisal of American civic life. He celebrated American democratic values and economic dynamism, but was sensitive toward increasing secularization and consumerist indulgence.

In the course of his research on Dulles, Carey discovered a revealing personal note in which Dulles confesses, “I have all the freedom I want or need. What I lack to some extent are the firm structures that reinforce, motivate, and direct the basic thrust of my existence.” Perhaps Dulles found freedom in his work of theological reconciliation, not due to circumstances, but to his character. In his lecture at the Acton Institute some 20 years later, he explained: “Some learn to go for long periods without sleep, to abstain from food, or to endure intense physical pain without abandoning their resolve. Such persons have greater freedom than others. They have a larger zone of inner self-determination.”

These words certainly proved true at the end of Dulles’ own life. In an interview published in 2008, the year of his death, he explained: “As I become increasingly paralyzed and unable to speak, I can identify with the many paralytics and mute persons in the Gospels, grateful for the loving and skillful care I receive and for the hope of everlasting life in Christ. If the Lord now calls me to a period of weakness, I know well that his power can be made perfect in infirmity. ‘Blessed be the name of the Lord!’” **RL**

Dan Hugger is librarian and research associate at the Acton Institute.

“

COURSES HIS FRESHMAN YEAR IN ART, HISTORY, AND LITERATURE FUELED AN AWAKENING OF RELIGIOUS SENTIMENTS.

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History for Life

Why dredge up the past? Why drag around that dead weight impeding our progress? Perhaps it's time for historians to rethink the effects of their work on the lives and souls of the general public and find a balance between the discipline of critique and the role of gratitude.

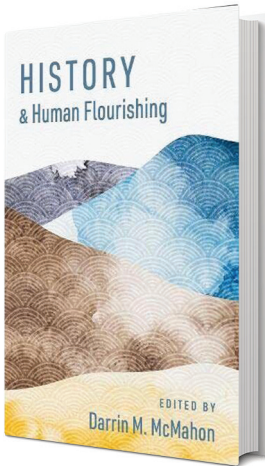
by WILFRED McCLAY

I HAVE TO BEGIN with a confession. I have found myself developing a bit of an allergy to the increasingly widespread use of the word *flourishing*. It seems to me to be an elusive term that is being asked to do more work than it has the capacity to do. It appears to have been devised to provide us with a way to talk about the achievement of human ends and happiness while prescinding from stating any of the norms and teleological assumptions that make such discourse meaningful. That is to say, it lets us talk about ends without having any agreement about what the proper ends might be.

To have a “flourishing” life sounds very much like having a fulfilled life, but its non-specificity is troubling. If we are to talk about fulfillment, shouldn't we

also be willing to talk about what it means to fulfill the *telos* that is peculiar to man? The root sense of the word *flourishing* is that of a flower that blossoms. But flowers don't blossom in any old way. A rose is not a carnation, even if it in some cases fails to grow into the rose it was made to be. Shouldn't we have an anthropology in place that can tell us, in a more normative way, what it means for humans to blossom? Or how we recognize the moral valence of flourishing when we see it? Is it possible to have a “flourishing” criminal enterprise?

Setting these quibbles aside, I must also confess that the intention behind this book and the series of which it is a part seems to me wholly admirable. The series editor, James O. Pawelski, begins the



History and Human Flourishing

Edited by Darrin M. McMahon
(Oxford University Press, 2022)

volume with an essay outlining the project, and it is extremely attractive. It is grounded in the contention that the academic disciplines making up what we call “the humanities” are most properly concerned not merely with “the creation of knowledge” but also with the cultivation of virtue (another term crying out for definition, but we’ll let that pass). The result is a series of books, like this one, exploring the potential for a “eudaimonic turn” in the academic work being undertaken in fields such as history, literary studies, music, visual arts, psychology, philosophy, and religious studies. It is an effort generously supported by funding from the Templeton Foundation, and it shows some of the effects of that provenance, as do the various centers of “human flourishing” that Templeton funds have helped establish at universities around the country: there is often a forced and artificial quality to the questions being asked, reflecting the clumsiness of the term *flourishing*.

But the quality of individual contributions in the case of the volume before us is very high. The editor, Darrin M. McMahon, is an outstanding intellectual historian, whose earlier work on the history of conceptions of happiness makes him a perfect choice for such an undertaking. He has found distinguished contributors who have managed to use the occasion to say meaningful things in response to the somewhat artificial stimulus of the larger project.

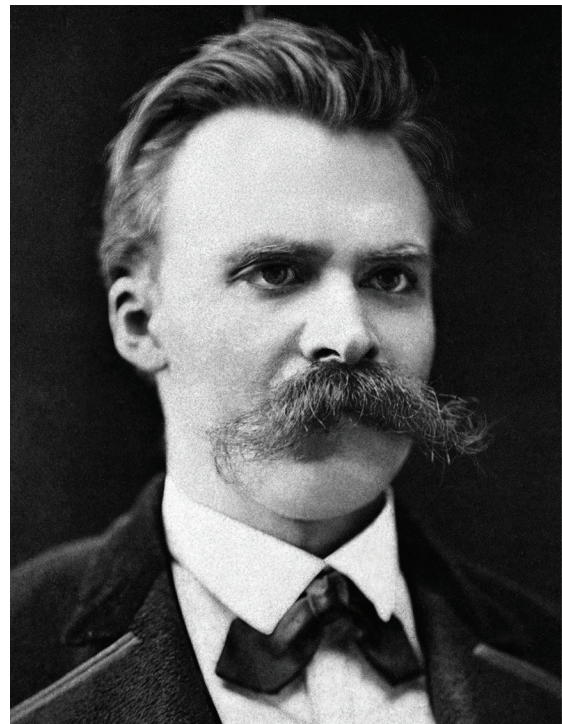
To begin with, McMahon’s introductory essay recasts the Templetonian jargon into something older and better: “What is the value of history for life?” That way of expressing the matter instantly places this question in a larger and

longer stream of thought and will recall for students of history Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1874 essay on “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” an evergreen source of reflection on this subject. It is a real question, as Nietzsche argued, whether historical knowledge is an enhancement for life or an encumbrance, a dead weight on the soul and the spirit that only serves to inhibit the adventurous energies of—dare we say it?—a fully flourishing individual. Nietzsche began his essay with a quotation from Goethe—the great chronicler of the deeds of that scholarship-bowed figure Faust—that “I hate everything that merely instructs me without increasing or directly quickening my activity.”

That states the problem at hand well. And indeed, there is a tendency in modern thought to regard history in even more sinister terms, as a delusion or fantasy, or worse. Remember Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus: “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” Or Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

And the question can be taken even deeper than that. Is it really true, what Socrates said about the examined life being the only life worth living? What

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)



“

IS IT SOMETIMES BETTER FOR THE HEALTH OF THE SOUL FOR US TO CULTIVATE THE CAPACITY TO FORGET AND NOT INQUIRE TOO MUCH INTO A PAST?

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if what we find out in our examination of the past is something terrible or embarrassing or morally compromising? Is it really better to remember such things? Or is it sometimes better for the health of the soul for us to cultivate the capacity to forget and not inquire too much into a past that may be more of a drag on us than a source of vitality? Nietzsche argues for the latter, and McMahon partly agrees with him, that Nietzsche's admonition against too much remembering is an “uncomfortable insight” into the reality of the human condition. Many psychologists have come to believe that the Freudian dictum that we need to “work through” the traumatic past may in fact be false, that “letting go” is a better strategy.

And yet, it is surely a part of historical inquiry to give voice and visibility to those people and things that have been silent or invisible, to expand the scope of our understanding and sympathies, and reckon with past injustices. But the critical disposition that dominates the current practice of history may have gone too far. McMahon mentions Walter Benjamin's celebrated statement that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” and finds it excessive and unbalanced.

So how does one find a balance in these things, a balance between the discipline of critique and the necessary role of celebration and gratitude in a genuinely flourishing human existence? It is to McMahon's immense credit that he even raises such issues and revitalizes the questions that Nietzsche asked a century and a half ago, which have taken on new relevance in a time when the energies of historical

scholarship are so overwhelmingly directed against the “documents of civilization.” Should historians think more about the potential effects of their work on the lives and souls of the general public? That question is not answered here, but it certainly is raised in a way that is hard to ignore.

As in any collection of essays, the contents of *History and Human Flourishing* vary in quality and relevance, and some show the forced quality alluded to above, or read like scholarship composed for other occasions and repurposed for this volume. But most of them rise to the level of McMahon's initial reflections. For example, D. Graham Burnett's essay on history as a vocation, as a calling, evokes questions similar to Nietzsche's, even if it arrives, boldly, at the notion that history ought to point us toward “what is eternal,” precisely by contrasting the things that are ephemeral to those that endure. Peter Stearns, who has for many years been pioneering the historical study of emotions, recommends a grand tour of various forms of happiness over the course of human history, which it is hoped might uncover insights into what is enduringly important and what we stand in need of today.

There are several essays (including McMahon's own contribution) dealing with the ways history is a consolation for the disappointments and uncertainties of life as it is actually lived by us. This seems to me a good and sober way of thinking about what the study of history, and the possession of historical consciousness—which are two very different things—might do for us. I would especially have liked to have seen more attention paid in the book to how historical consciousness, both on the individual and the societal level, contributes to human flourishing. In general, the essays in the book are academic works composed by academic writers for academic audiences. And historical consciousness—by which I mean an awareness and appreciation of the past's immanence in the present—is a subject that academic works of history rarely if ever touch on. That this book does touch on it, in places, and ventures into territory where academics rarely tread is reason enough to be grateful for it, and for the project that gave it life. **RL**

Wilfred McClay is professor of history at Hillsdale College and author of Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story.



The Gods of the Trade Book Publishers

For at least a century, publishers have been pumping out spiritual-but-not-religious bestsellers. One man in particular made a career of it, and made the career of many. But despite some great names affixed to those books, the legacy of seeking a broad audience of the broadminded is a curious one at best.

by ANTHONY SACRAMONE

IN 1979, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* hit bookshelves. In its pages, Boston University sociology professor Peter L. Berger highlighted what students of religion had long recognized, that “*homo sapiens* is a situated being, but also a being forever driven to transcend his situation.” Such restlessness escalated as our world got smaller, through exploration, commercial travel, and *now*, certainly, the internet. Berger went on to discuss “modernity as the universalization of heresy,” which he defined literally from the Greek verb *hairein*, “to choose.”

In the ancient world, authority was more or less adamant, fixed, and so one inherited a religion, and deviations were few and fraught with peril.

For us, however, who live in a world of competing authorities and “of religious uncertainty...modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.” And we Americans love choice. We love variety. We are easily bored. And we hate being told what to do.

Missing from Berger’s book, however, was any thoroughgoing exploration of the role popular books played in the spread of modern heresy. And certainly the role one man in particular played. *God the Bestseller: How One Editor Transformed American Religion a Book at a Time* more than makes up for that lacuna. Stephen Prothero, another Boston University professor, brings to life Eugene Exman, “who ran the religion book department at Harper & Brothers

and then Harper & Rowe between 1928 and 1965,” and who published some of the most recognizable names in the world of religion (and quasi religion) of that period, from Harry Emerson Fosdick and Albert Schweitzer to Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA.

Exman dedicated his publishing career to producing a “Book of Books,” one that collated the best that all religions and spiritual practices had to offer in the way of religious experience. Exman’s own story, or at least Prothero’s telling of it, begins with religious experience—“I was invaded,” Exman would tell people. “He felt himself being lifted up and out of his body.” God revealed himself to a 16-year-old farm boy in a flash of light. Exman would live off that memory, that experience, the rest of his life, seeking to reproduce it and to enable others to “experience” God for themselves as he had.

This is key, because if there’s one phrase that’s repeated mantra-like in *God the Bestseller* it’s “hide-bound dogma” (note the modifier). The books Exman would publish at the helm of Harper and Rowe’s religion division would seek that which transcended mere doctrine, a “perennial philosophy,” as Aldous Huxley’s own bestseller would be called—a common thread that supposedly runs through all religions, tying the earthly to the heavenly, matter to the spirit.

Exman was raised Baptist, a construal of the Christian faith that gives little truck to man-made traditions, rituals, and creeds to begin with. But the synthetic, syncretistic “spirituality” promoted by Exman and his authors, who included a Who’s Who of 20th century spirituality for the masses, everyone from Buddhist D.T. Suzuki to Catholics Dorothy

“
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Day and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to Hindu Jiddu Krishnamurti, would make most Baptists gasp.

Not surprisingly, when Exman got to the University of Chicago Divinity School, he began to question that encounter with the divine. He began to question his original calling as a missionary. And so he got into publishing, first at University of Chicago Press and then at the new religious book department of Harper & Brothers. The rest would become history.

Lest anyone think the religious bestseller began with Billy Graham, or even Exman’s authors, the 1920s had already produced more than its share. “Religious nonfiction was the second-best-selling book genre, trailing only adult fiction,” notes

Harper & Brothers Publishers logo



Eugene Exman (1900–1975)



Photo courtesy University of Chicago Photographic Archive, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Prothero. However, “the overwhelming majority of religious books sold in the United States were either Bibles or parochial projects,” like Lutheran sermons for Lutheran pastors. Exman wanted to change that. He wanted to reach a broader reading public. And he “had no interest in interdenominational battles.” He wanted to cross denominational, and eventually religious, lines.

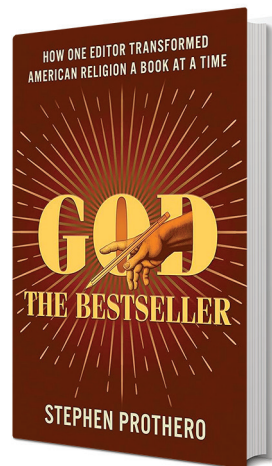
The book that provided the inspiration for this new publishing vision was William James’ own best-seller, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In this work, James sought to “defend religion among its secular despisers...by tabling the question of truth and focusing instead on experiences.” This would become the blueprint for Exman’s publishing career.

One key to Exman’s publishing success was the editorial skill set of Margueritte Bro, who wrote Exman while working on a piece for the *Christian Century* on Edgar Cayce, the professional “psychic” whose supposedly preternatural talents enthralled both the writer-editor Bro and, later, Exman. Bro and Exman proved kindred spirits whose spiritual hunger led them to seek out “sainthood” not only in their own lives but in that of others. “I have a hobby...of collecting and cataloguing saints,” Exman once admitted. And the first prominent “saint” was the liberal Protestant churchman Harry Emerson Fosdick. Although Exman was not big on institutional religion, he remained for all his life a regular churchgoer, first

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969)



Photo by Underwood & Underwood, courtesy New York Public Library



God the Bestseller: How One Editor Transformed American Religion a Book at a Time

By Stephen Prothero
(HarperOne, 2023)

as a member of Fosdick’s Park Avenue Baptist Church and then at Riverside Church, built on the Upper West Side with money supplied by another Baptist, John D. Rockefeller, and also pastored by Fosdick.

Fosdick was already a bestselling author by the time Exman entered the picture, with his first title, *The Meaning of Prayer*, appearing in 1915. But as noted, by the 1920s, “the religious book business was booming,” due in part to the shaking of people’s confidence in the inevitability of Progress in light of the War to End All Wars. Fosdick was also on the frontlines in the modernist-fundamentalist debate—in the former’s camp, of course. His first big book for Exman and Harper was a collection of previously published essays, *As I See Religion* (1932). Here Fosdick “presented an inclusive and pluralistic vision of religion,” even though he “rejected the temptation to seek ‘some irreducible minimum that...makes one substance of all faiths from Shintoism to Christian science.’” (Fosdick also believed that “Jesus will never be surpassed,” which “would not have made sense to Exman, who saw Jesus as one mystic among many.”)

Despite Fosdick’s enormous popularity in his day (relatively speaking), “No one today need read him or probably does read him for a single theological insight,” according to church historian Martin Marty. More lasting in his impact was Aldous Huxley, most famous for his dystopian *Brave New World*. Huxley participated, along with Exman, science writer-philosopher Gerald Heard, and novelist-playwright Christopher Isherwood, in a monastic-like community of spiritual seekers called Trabuco, in the Santa Ana Mountains. There they and occasional droppers-in would experiment with various forms of meditation, renunciation, contemplation—i.e., the

“experiential religion” that Exman preferred. It was Heard who introduced Huxley to Vedanta, one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy. At Trabuco, Eastern practices predominated, with Jesus relegated to just one of the many incarnations of the Divine. Trabuco, however, would go belly up within a decade, with the Vedanta Society of Southern California assuming its debts and taking over its space.

The Trabuco experiment’s true legacy would prove to be the flurry of titles that furthered the idea of the supposed unity of all world religions. Not only Huxley’s *Perennial Philosophy* but also fresh translations of Hindu classics and D.T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1949). On Exman’s to-do list was yet a more comprehensive comparative-religion book, that Book of Books, which was realized in a manner by Huston Smith’s mega-selling *The Religions of Man* (1958).

What constituted “religion,” even “spirituality,” was stretched to literally incredible lengths as Exman and his editor/friend/spiritual confidante Bro explored the paranormal. “It was their shared interest in the psychic Edgar Cayce that brought them together in 1943. They both believed in reincarnation. They both consulted with mediums.” This, too, had roots in William James, who with his wife began consulting a medium soon after their infant son died. “James ultimately concluded that there was lots of evidence of ‘really supernormal knowledge’ but not enough to convince him of the possibility of communicating with the dead.” Exman, too, “was sympathetic



**AT TRABUCO,
EASTERN PRACTICES
PREDOMINATED, WITH
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OF THE DIVINE.**



but more circumspect,” especially when it came to Harper’s reputation.

Nevertheless, Harper would publish *Nothing So Strange*, the as-told-to autobiography of one Arthur Ford, a “trance medium” who in 1929 claimed to have contacted the late Harry Houdini. Bro would later credit Exman with bringing Ford “to Protestant respectability,” although this would depend on the Protestant, I imagine.

If this weren’t sufficiently surreal, there was LSD for an extra head spin. Heard and Huxley “became attracted in the early 1950s to the possibility of attaining mystical union with the divine through chemicals. Mescaline was followed by LSD. Huxley chronicled his experimentation in *Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. Heard, too, pitched a book about his experience with mescaline, which he described as “a profoundly religious one.” Exman, to his credit, was “suspicious that Heard was attempting to get through drugs what he had been unable to achieve through spiritual discipline.”

Nevertheless, Exman would finally be persuaded to try LSD, which at the time was not an illegal substance. A second trip turned out to be a “shattering experience,” and turned him off drug use as a door to the divine once and for all.

Among the more vaunted, dare I say conventional, names that Exman published during his tenure at Harper were two Nobel Prize winners and an almost saint: Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Schweitzer, and Dorothy Day.

Day, the Catholic convert and “disreputable saint,” was an activist who, along with Peter Maurin, edited and published *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, which sold for a solitary cent and “developed over the course of the 1930s from a newspaper into a movement devoted to seeing Christ in all people, including (and especially) the homeless and the poor.”

Her book *The Long Loneliness* “narrated a series of personal experiences without losing sight of the importance of religious community and the imperative of social and political action.” Written not merely for fellow Catholics but, like all of Exman’s books, for a broader, educated audience, *The Long Loneliness*, published in 1952, garnered positive reviews, and a *New Yorker* profile of the author boosted sales.

Exman would pass on Day’s biography of the Little Flower, St. Therese of Lisieux. Bro’s response to the manuscript “oozed anti-Catholic bias.” She considered St. Therese’s mortifications as “psychopathic.”



The bus on which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, thus sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott

“Hells bells, if we did all emulate the Little Flower we would have a generation of emotionally chastened nincompoops.” So much for the value of varied religious experience.

More down-to-earth was one of Exman’s idols, the man he dubbed “the Thirteenth Apostle,” Albert Schweitzer. The Harper tomes *Music in the Life of Albert Schweitzer* (1951) and *The Problem of Peace in the World Today* (1954) added to “the myth of Schweitzer.” Exman extolled the Nobel Peace Prize winner for his activism and expansive respect-for-life ethics, which the doctor believed should be extended to animals and even plants. “All deep thinking ends in mysticism,” Albert Schweitzer said. “Real prayer is finding peace in all that comes to you and not fretting against that which comes....The best prayer is ‘Thy will be done.’” This was all in keeping with the pan-religious spirituality that Exman (and Bro) wanted to spread.

Schweitzer’s fame would fade over time as critics began to dissect his medical work in Africa, which he intended, in Prothero’s words, “to atone for the sins of White colonizers,” as just another kind of imperialism. As they dug through his *oeuvre*, they came upon references and commentary (“The negro is a child, and with children nothing can be done without the use of authority”) deemed condescending at the least and racist at worst. The man who thought he had

dismantled orthodox beliefs about Jesus in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus* was himself finally dismantled.

While Exman wholeheartedly embraced James’ definition of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine,” he nevertheless remained attracted to activists, those who put their bodies where their spirituality was. This naturally drew him to Martin Luther King Jr. Exman competed with other major publishers to get into print a book about the Montgomery bus boycott, which began on December 5, 1955. Exman went to Montgomery and reached out to King personally, winning the civil rights leader’s trust. At first, the editor offered to hire a ghostwriter to work with the 28-year-old on his first book, but King was having none of it. While he employed the aid of historian Lawrence Reddick to write *Stride Toward Freedom*, and Exman and Bro both took strong editorial hands, “in the Boston University archives, there are chapter drafts written in King’s hand, sometimes in pencil, sometimes in red pen.”

Stride Toward Freedom “was a departure for Exman and his Book of Books, which had not lived up to the pluralistic promises” he had first made for it. Though he had published Hindus and Buddhists, “his list slighted Black writers.” Nevertheless, King’s first book garnered glowing reviews in scores of daily newspapers and magazines, with one reviewer “comparing King with Gandhi and Schweitzer.” But King’s success also meant the loss of Exman’s confidante, friend, and colleague, Margueritte Bro, who decided to resign as a contract editor for Harper after a battle over both publishing and personal priorities. (Harper had a contract with Bro’s sister to write on civil rights that preceded the agreement with King. Exman saw King as the better seller, however, and published his first.) “I feel that for you growth is stymied.” She meant, of course, spiritual growth, and noted that “the pressure of practicalities” (book sales) was inhibiting his one-time goal of union with his Higher Power.

Which takes us back to Exman’s “quest to recapture that moment on the road to Blanchester—to experience God in his bones again.” Here Prothero must admit that “You can’t serve God and publishing.” But a mere worldly busyness was hardly all that stood in the way of spiritual maturity. Did Exman

really think he could have achieved some kind of “sainthood,” which presumably entailed a direct line to the divine, had he merely dropped out of the rat race? Just consider the manifold “experiences” that were to be had and that he (and William James) had recorded. Who or what is this God he sought to connect with? Hadn’t his misfire with LSD convinced him that wild, otherworldly, even inner-driven experiences may not necessarily be divine? Despite his contribution to our age of the “nones,” the swapping out of religion for spirituality, “Exman himself was spiritual and religious. He faithfully went to church. He put money in the collection plate. He sat on church committees. But he didn’t believe the real work of the spirit happened amid stained glass and altars.” That fear of the dreaded “hidebound dogma” again. And yet, “by reducing the ‘religion’ of Exman and his circle to what they denied, that term also erases too much.” Prothero insists that Exman, in a sense, had his cake and ate it too: he had managed to salvage religion, to make it a safe word, by cultivating a “religion of experience.” Yes, but whose? And of what?

The essence of *religio* is to bind together. And while the experience-chasers can hold coffee klaches and small group meet-ups to discuss all the feels, that is not and never will be a religion. Which Prothero more or less gets.

Exman’s project succeeded because its native habitat is the ecology of consumer capitalism. The religion of experience preaches the habit of the never-ending search. That search produces not finding but longing. And the object of that longing is displaced by degrees—from God to the experience of God to the experience of whatever you understand to be God.

And yet Prothero acknowledges that “many millions of Americans...reject the religious pluralism of Exman’s Book of Books.” He adds, as if through gritted teeth, “What matters in religion is not experience but truth.... Their group is in possession of that truth, and they need to fight to defend it against falsehoods, perhaps even with guns.” (Again, the author teaches at Boston University, so you knew there had to be a connection drawn, albeit parenthetically, between “hidebound dogma” and violence.)

As a short history of the American religious publishing game in the mid-20th century, and the signal

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role one man (and woman) played in that history, virtually transforming what passed for religion in the broader reading public’s imagination, Stephen Prothero does yeoman’s work in *God the Bestseller*. Anyone in the publishing trade will find this an enjoyable, if somewhat repetitive, read. (A quibble: Prothero risibly refers to the *Commentary* magazine of the mid-1940s as “conservative” as an explanation for its less-than-stellar review of Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*. This is to read a later political orientation back into the publication’s liberal beginnings, a lazy way to explain the magazine’s disdain for the book’s “popular tone [and] vulgar appeal to the lending-library public.”)

Exman’s was “a life interrupted by a global pandemic, a global depression, and two world wars [but he] dedicated it to making meaning out of what to many in his generation seemed to be a meaningless morass.” In pursuit of meaning, he put between covers many a spiritual path and, despite his pursuit of that “perennial philosophy,” what can only be deemed contradictory spiritual paths. More poignantly, Prothero notes, “He died a company man. He died a good man. He did not die a happy mystic.” Yet his legacy abides. Just go on the Amazon website, type in “religious experience,” and see what comes up as the first among the more than 30,000 hits. Let’s just say you’ll never go broke exploring the variety of religious experiences. **RI.**

Anthony Sacramone is editor-in-chief of Religion & Liberty.



The Varieties of Reformation Experience

The Reformers of the 16th century may have seen themselves as returning to an earlier “catholic” church, but the variety of communions their movement unleashed makes any plea for catholicity difficult to defend.

by ALEC RYRIE

INNOCENT VISITORS TO an Episcopalian or Anglican church are often startled when the congregation blithely proclaim in the creed that they believe in “the holy Catholic Church.” Aren’t they supposed to be the other guys? But there are excellent reasons for that claim, and Matthew Barrett’s backbreaking book is written to explain it. It is a claim that goes right to the heart of what the Protestant Reformation was and is.

Since ancient times, the Christian church has claimed to be *catholic*, or “universal”: the body of Christ, united across time and space, the living and the dead. It was one way the ancients distinguished

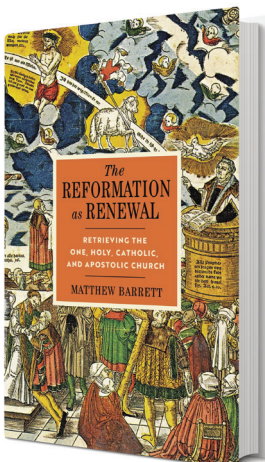
orthodoxy from heresy. The true, catholic faith, Vincent of Lérins famously claimed in the fifth century, is that which has been believed everywhere, at all times, by all Christian people. By contrast, a heresy or sect is new, confined to a particular place, and led by a particular troublemaker. Heresies flare up and die out like candles. The Church shines as constant as the sun.

But, of course, it’s not so simple. Sometimes the “catholic” church, or some of its members, come up with a new formula—defining the Trinity, or the pope’s authority, or the nature of salvation. The claim is that this is not an innovation, just a clarification of

long-standing beliefs; but not everyone agrees. Often enough, this sort of thing has led to splits that are not confined to one corner of Christendom but divide the entire body for centuries. Like it or not, the plain truth is that Christianity is a very, very plural tradition. There is in fact very little that has truly been believed everywhere, at all times, and by all Christians.

The term *catholic*—which began as a way of dismissing isolated dissidents—therefore became disputed property. The 16th-century Reformation was a particularly nasty divorce, and like so many divorces it was further poisoned by squabbles over who got to keep what. So, for example, both sides claimed to be *evangelical*, that is, to preach the true Christian gospel; but that word ended up de facto as Protestant property. Likewise, both sides claimed to be *catholic*, to represent universal, ancient Christianity. But nowadays, everyone knows who the word “Catholic” refers to. Maybe that division of the linguistic assets isn’t fair, but what divorce settlement ever is?

So Barrett has an uphill battle to fight. He’s a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, and his main audience is his fellow Protestants: he wants them to remember and embrace their tradition’s catholic identity. In this he is plainly, inescapably, and importantly right. The Protestant Reformers really did understand themselves as catholic Christians whose hope was to return the whole church to certain ancient, universal truths from which they believed it had wandered. When the Augsburg reformer Urbanus Rhegius wrote a book called *The New Doctrine* in 1526, his argument was that the *pope* was teaching new (and therefore false) doctrine, while he, along with Martin Luther and others, had recovered older truths.



*The Reformation
as Renewal:
Retrieving the One,
Holy, Catholic, and
Apostolic Church*

By Matthew Barrett
(Zondervan Academic,
2023)

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**THE BOOK’S MOST
URGENT MESSAGE
TO THE EVANGELICAL
COMMUNITY IS: DON’T
THINK OF YOURSELVES
AS RADICALS OR
INNOVATORS.**
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Ancient precedents were not all that mattered. The first Reformers were late medieval Christians, people of their own time. They had some sharp disagreements with the theological consensus of their age, but they were also immersed in that consensus and shared most of it. Barrett reminds us of a truth so obvious it is often forgotten: that Protestants and (Roman) Catholics agreed on all the great, central, historic doctrines of Christianity. Like modern political parties, the 16th century’s warring theologians were so focused on the issues dividing them that they forgot how much bedrock they shared.

It is a profound point. If this book is a little longer than it needs to be, if it could do with the attention of a good copy editor, and if it makes gratuitous use of words like *homochromous*, truths like this cover over a multitude of such sins. Indeed, the most theologically technical part of the book is the most important. This is where Barrett argues closely that the Protestant Reformers were heirs to much of the medieval tradition as well as to the early Church. “Reformers like Luther, Melancthon and Calvin were more indebted (and possibly influenced) by Thomas [Aquinas] than they ever knew.” The book’s most urgent message to the evangelical community is: don’t think of yourselves as radicals or innovators, but as the inheritors of a long tradition. The Reformers were in the fullest sense *conservatives*.

In particular, Barrett is very concerned to rebut one specific charge: that the Reformers favored “univocity of being,” that is, that they believed created

things (such as humans) *exist* in the same sense that God exists. Instead, he links them back to the older orthodoxy that our being is dependent and contingent; that we only exist because and to the extent that we participate in the eternal, absolute being of God. His argument here seems pretty sound to me. I am less clear that, as he hopes, it means the Reformers can be cleared of any blame for secularization.

So, yes: the Reformers really did see themselves as catholic Christians, whose aim was to renew the one, universal church, not to found a kaleidoscope of new ones. The harder part is that Barrett believes them. Although he claims endearingly that his book is not a defense of the Reformers' views, he is soon enough referring to an argument against them as "another of the devil's tactics" and claiming, less endearingly, that an idea he dislikes "deserves a slow and painful death."

And yet...if we define the Reformers' mission as renewing and repristinating the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, we have to squint pretty hard to see it as anything other than a failure. They did not want to form new churches; Luther, at least, did not choose to leave the pope's church but was expelled from it. But founding new churches, isolated to specific territories, is exactly what he and others ended up doing. The "catholic" church is supposed, among other things, to be worldwide, embracing all Christendom. During the 16th century, and indeed for a good two centuries to follow, Protestantism mostly remained a series of geographically confined, mutually suspicious sects. It's no accident that the pope's church, which kept the allegiance of the majority of

Europe and was establishing missions all around the world, managed to hold onto the C-word for itself.

The Protestants stoutly replied that being *catholic* was not about institutional continuity or geographical extent (neither of which they could claim), but about doctrine and practice. They were, they insisted, the custodians of ancient truths that the papacy had abandoned. As Ronald Reagan said about the Democrats: he didn't leave them; they left him. It's a good line. But really? The razor-sharp English satirists W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman defined the Reformation as when "the Pope...seceded with all his followers from the Church of England." If you try hard enough, you can see the world that way, but you're not going to bring many people with you.

Barrett's argument is learned, exhaustive, and well-grounded, but for me it stumbles on two different, almost opposite obstacles. One is that the actual Reformation—the one that really happened, not the one the theologians imagined or the one its modern partisans might wish had taken place—was not nearly as catholic or as conservative as he suggests. It's true that when Luther took his stand on conscience and the Word of God at the Diet of Worms he was not at all intending to create relativism, individualism, or the modern world. But maybe he did it anyway.

As Barrett's narrative makes clear—he can't avoid the fact—the Reformers were from the very beginning unable to keep their own supposedly catholic movement together. They called for a proper, free

Luther at the Diet of Worms by Anton von Werner (1877)



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THE REFORMERS WERE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING UNABLE TO KEEP THEIR OWN SUPPOSEDLY CATHOLIC MOVEMENT TOGETHER.

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general council of the Church to resolve their theological concerns, but the truth was—a truth Luther had conceded as early as 1519—that no such council could ever work, because those who disagreed with it would refuse to be bound by it. They would appeal to Word and conscience instead. The Reformers *wanted* to renew catholic orthodoxy, but they couldn't do it, because they couldn't—and still can't—agree on what that orthodoxy should be. That is not an accident or some unfortunate outcome of the Reformation. It was baked in from the start.

To make his argument work, Barrett has to exclude the radicals, spiritualists, and Anabaptists from the group he calls “the Reformers.” It is true that these people generally did *not* claim the “catholic” mantle for themselves, although Barrett has to be nimble in arguing that his own Baptist tradition should not be tarred with the same brush. Unfortunately, the *cor-don sanitaire* between respectable catholic Reformers and dangerous Anabaptist radicals is a lot more permeable than Barrett admits. For a couple of decades now, scholars have been pointing out how many people resist easy classification as one or the other, or indeed crisscross the line. The “mainstream” Reformers badly insisted that the radicals were quite different from themselves and were willing to persecute them brutally to underline the point. But the Reformation generated radicalism around itself wherever it went, like saplings around a tree. You can chop them down, but they will keep springing up, and you can't claim that that is a coincidence. Leave them alone and they may outgrow the original.

The actual Reformation was a cacophony of religious variety, which did not in fact create anything

that looks particularly “catholic.” It is true that the sapling we call the Baptist tradition is rooted, at least partly, in Calvinism, but in a strand of Calvinism that, during the ferment of England's civil wars, decided to abandon the aspiration to be a single, catholic church and instead to embrace voluntarism and the status of a minority sect.

The other problem is almost opposite: the R-word itself. Barrett talks unselfconsciously about “the Reformers” and “the Reformation,” but while Luther and his contemporaries certainly believed they were engaged in reformation, the idea of *the* Reformation, a singular event not an ongoing process, was not one they would have recognized. Barrett says, for example, that “Erasmus was no Reformer...the Reformation had not yet begun when Erasmus' edition [of the New Testament] was published.” But Erasmus of Rotterdam was nothing if not a reformer. What Barrett means is that he did not anticipate Luther's theology of salvation, which is true—but that capital R in his sentence is doing an awful lot of work. The label “the Reformation” only began to be applied to the events Luther triggered from the late 1600s. If we're going to use it, we need to be aware that it's an anachronism.

On its face, this would only strengthen Barrett's argument. The particular group of reformers he calls “the Reformers” were not, in their own eyes, a species apart: simply members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church intent on reforming it from within, like so many others before and after them. The process of *reformation* is a continuous fact of the church's earthly existence. The idea that there should be one, singular reformation, *the* Reformation, is almost offensive. If we apply that label to the 16th-century movement that (despite itself) resulted in schism and in the emergence of Protestant churches, we are in effect denying their movement the very catholicity on which Barrett wants to insist. But if we do not—if this simply becomes one movement for reform in the long sweep of Christian history—then its leaders are no longer heroes, its theology is no longer normative, and the sand shifts under Protestantism's feet.

It's a cruel dilemma. You can have Catholicity, the whole rich, varied, squabbling, ugly, beautiful tradition. Or you can have the Reformation, a single, bright heroic moment. I'm not sure you can have both. **RL**

Alec Ryrie is professor of the history of Christianity at Durham University.



Carving on the door of the Gniezno Cathedral depicting St. Adalbert of Prague pleading with Boleslaus II, Duke of Bohemia, for the release of slaves

Catholicism and Slavery: Setting the Record Straight

The Catholic Church is often chastised for tolerating, even promoting, slavery as Catholic nations expanded their empires into Africa and the New World. But a fair reading of the evidence shows that the Church was more often on the side of the angels—and the enslaved.

by SAMUEL GREGG

IT'S EASY TO FORGET that the institution of slavery has constituted a social norm in human history. From the grand perspective of time, its supporters and defenders have far outnumbered its critics and condemners.

While one can find intimations of unease with slavery in some Greek and Roman thinkers, there is little question that it was Christianity that introduced the deepest doubts about both the legitimacy of slavery as a practice and the widespread cultural habit of viewing entire categories of people as natural slaves.

This runs against the common narrative that it is only with the various Enlightenments that

slavery was subsequently challenged. With some notable exceptions, Enlightenment thinkers were either silent on the topic or decidedly ambiguous. In fact, the institution that most often was the target of many Enlightenment thinkers—the Catholic Church—turns out to have been consistent and early in its condemnation of slavery.

Knowledge of Catholicism's firm stance against slavery is not widespread, even among Catholics, some of whom hold senior positions in the Church today. I was reminded of this recently when reading Pope Francis' response to questions submitted by five cardinals in July 2023: specifically, the part in which

the pope addressed the broad topic of the magisterium's interpretation of Scripture and its own previous statements. Referring particularly to Pope Nicholas V's Bull *Dum Diversas* (1452), Francis describes this as a magisterial document "that tolerated slavery," and thus a text that "requires interpretation."

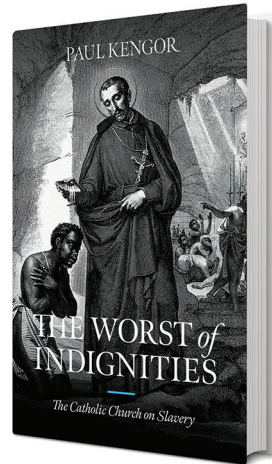
Enter a new and very timely book, *The Worst of Indignities: The Catholic Church on Slavery*. Its author, Paul Kengor, addresses the topic of *Dum Diversas* and another of Nicholas V's bulls, *Romanus Pontifex* (circa 1454), at the book's very beginning. Like any good scholar, Kengor analyzes the two texts carefully and consults serious commentators on the topic. This leads him to two conclusions.

The first is that one needs to understand the context of both documents. One is the treatment of captives taken during war at a time in which the customs and rules surrounding this topic, especially as expressed in the law of nations, were then being debated. This was a period in which, Kengor notes, "the notion of 'just' enslavement was accepted as a form of punishment for dealing with wartime prisoners in a just war." Other scholars also observe, Kengor points out, that Nicholas V was addressing a particular situation (Portugal's expansion into West Africa and subsequent conflict with pagan and Muslim populations). The pope's comments, one cited scholar states, were "not meant to apply to all times and places."

Kengor's second conclusion is that, even putting the worst interpretation upon these two documents (which, Kengor admits, might yet be accurate), we should bear in mind that these statements

were utter exceptions, completely anomalous to other popes, clergy, lay leaders, and Church councils over two millennia—that is, immediately before, immediately after, and ever since. Any modern scholar who seeks to elevate those two statements above and beyond everything else is being grossly unfair. That would not be scholarly.

Much of Kengor's book subsequently explains the "before," "after," and "ever since" of the Catholic Church's condemnation of slavery and how this teaching emerged very early in the Church's life. Alongside exploring the history of the teaching, Kengor addresses how Catholic bishops, priests, religious orders, and laypeople treated slaves. In other words, ideas and praxis are given equal attention.



The Worst of Indignities: The Catholic Church on Slavery

By Paul Kengor
(Emmaus Road, 2023)

On the level of formal teaching, the Church's record, Kengor illustrates, is one of consistent opposition to slavery. Very quickly, slavery was understood to be sinful by the Church. The position emerged more or less directly from the Gospels and the writings of St. Paul. It was also considered universal in its application.

This last point matters because a few scholars have argued that the Church was opposed only to the enslavement of Christians, whether by Christians or non-Christians, the implication being it was acceptable to enslave non-Christians. Certainly, some statements by popes and councils refer explicitly to Christians, but the omission of references to non-Christians is not intentional. For one thing, most church documents on slavery refer to the wrongness of enslaving anyone. It is also the case that statements about enslaving Christians by popes like Eugene IV were accompanied by other documents

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THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY HAS CONSTITUTED A SOCIAL NORM IN HUMAN HISTORY.

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composed by the same popes “that addressed the welfare of all people.”

In making his argument, Kengor analyzes a formidable amount of material to demonstrate the consistency of official Catholic magisterial teaching on the inherently evil nature of slavery. Especially concise statements were issued by the Holy Office (today’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith) in the 17th century. These spelled out in question-and-answer format not only the wrongness of slavery itself but also the obligation of captors, buyers, and owners of slaves to free and compensate them. There is no mention of the guilt and responsibility of anyone involved in the slave business being diminished by cultural, psychological, or sociological factors that might affect their personal culpability for their actions.

Catholic teaching on slavery, Kengor also illustrates, was “far ahead of the world.” Though it is politically incorrect to say so, Kengor underscores that slavery simply was not questioned in any meaningful way in pagan Europe or pre-Christian cultures in North America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. At a time in which there are tendencies to idealize such cultures—or even deny that brutal things like mass slavery and human sacrifice occurred in Mesoamerican cultures—these truths bear repeating.

An excavated *tzompantli* displaying sacrificial victims at the Templo Mayor in modern-day Mexico City



Photo by Juan Carlos Fonseca Mola / Wikipedia

Formal teaching, however, is one thing. Practice is another. Kengor does not shy away from acknowledging that numerous Catholics throughout history have failed to acknowledge and embrace Catholic teaching on slavery. Bishops, priests, and male and female religious orders purchased, owned, and sold slaves at different points of history. Kengor highlights, for instance, how the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) owned slaves in pre-colonial and pre-Civil War America: something for which the Jesuits and other Catholic religious orders have since apologized.

In one sense, the fact of such practices is disturbing. In another sense, however, there is nothing extraordinary about these facts. Every Catholic, including those formally declared to be saints, has sinned. There have also been plenty of Catholics who have decided that the Church’s magisterial teaching somehow doesn’t apply to them, or who have quietly (or loudly) dissented from church teaching.

But for every Catholic who has denied that certain sinful acts are indeed evil and never to be done, there are those who have not only firmly held to church teaching on such matters but also sought to see its implications realized in practice. That includes working to ameliorate the effects and workings of slavery and striving for its abolition.

In many cases, this was reflected in the decision of those who, having converted to Christianity, made the decision also to free their slaves. Some clergy worked strenuously to redeem slaves, often going to slave markets, where captives from war or raids were being auctioned off, to buy them and then immediately set them free. Sometimes high church officials directly confronted Christians engaged in practices associated with slavery. A good example is Pope St. Gregory III’s decision to issue a prohibition against Christians who persisted “in selling their slaves to pagans for sacrifices.”

This emphasis upon the practical work of liberating slaves eventually assumed institutional form. By the beginning of the second millennium, entire religious orders were being created for the primary purpose of emancipating slaves. St. John of Matha (1160–1213), for instance, founded an order in 1198 dedicated to ransoming Christians who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery by pirates of the Barbary Coast. Such work—much of which was dangerous and often cost the lives of monk-liberators—continued for centuries. The effectiveness of these activities often involved avoiding direct confrontation with

enslavers, which would have undermined the ability of such individuals and religious orders to rescue people from servitude.

Then there were the intellectual battles carried out by theologians who fought efforts to produce rationalizations for the enslavement of peoples. Spanish policy toward the native peoples of the Americas is a case in point. Missionaries in modern-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, for example, openly preached against the harsh treatment of these peoples by their Spanish masters.

This was followed by the growth of an entire network of Catholic thinkers, epitomized by the Dominican theologian Francisco de Vitoria, who came to the defense of the native peoples and employed the only tool they had—the natural law tradition—to affirm the intrinsic dignity of the natives, and therefore all the rights that flowed directly from that dignity. This involved engaging in intense debates with other Catholic theologians who sought to revive the Aristotelian idea of natural slavery to justify the Spanish conquerors' dispossession of the native people's lands.

But the most moving part of Kengor's book is his account of the lives of three former slaves of the modern era. One of them, Josephine Bakhita (1869–1947), a convert to Catholicism, has been declared a saint. The other two, Pierre Toussaint (1766–1853) and Augustus Tolton (1854–1897), have been accorded the title of “venerable,” meaning that their heroic virtue has been formally recognized by the Church.

Kengor does not soft-peddle the impact of slavery on these three people, however. The details of St. Josephine Bakhita's early life are especially harrowing. In each case, it should be noted, they chose neither the path of bitterness and vengeance nor that of self-destruction. Instead, they embraced the Christian faith in all its fullness and showed that, despite having been enslaved, living the Christian life is no mere “ideal” but something that everyone is capable of realizing.

Toward the end of his book, Kengor draws attention to Pope Francis' powerful statements against slavery in the modern world, whether it is human trafficking or the older forms of slavery that persist in many parts of the world today. Kengor also notes, however, that Pope Francis apparently does not have a good grasp of the Church's long history of opposition to slavery. In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, for instance, Francis comments, “I sometimes wonder why, in light of [the

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SOME CLERGY WORKED STRENUOUSLY TO REDEEM SLAVES, OFTEN GOING TO SLAVE MARKETS TO BUY THEM AND THEN SET THEM FREE.

”

manifest evil of modern slavery], it took so long for the Church unequivocally to condemn slavery and various forms of violence” (FT 86).

As Kengor states, this “is a disappointingly inaccurate claim for a Roman Catholic Church that commendably condemned slavery earlier than essentially every existing country, culture, and institution.” That negative judgment on slavery was based squarely on the inner logic of what Christ ultimately reveals about the nature, dignity, and ultimate end of the human person. It also has nothing in common, Kengor stresses, with contemporary secular liberationist movements grounded in ideologies like identity politics, intersectionality, and critical race theory, all of which mimic the claims of revealed religion.

In the end, the Christian condemnation of slavery is rooted firmly in the idea, so beautifully expressed in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, that all people—whatever their sex, ethnicity, or faith—are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). This means every single one of us is a seamless integration of materiality and spirit that includes reason and free will. That common image-bearing nature not only makes our enslavement of other people unthinkable; it is also central to our capacity to resist that other form of enslavement: the slavery to sin and evil from which Christ came to liberate us. **RL**

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The Rebirth of a Heretical Islam

The history of Islam is a complex one and includes a variety of schools and reform movements, a small number of which advocated hatred for and violence against “infidels” and “polytheists.” Understanding the roots of these sects is especially helpful today.

by **MUSTAFA AKYOL**

WHEN THE TERRORIST army that calls itself “the Islamic state,” or ISIS, captured large parts of Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s, the world was shocked. Many Muslims around the world were also shocked, because the savagery of this self-declared “caliphate” was deeply at odds with what they knew as their religion. Many of them, therefore, simply declared that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam.

Meanwhile, some Islamic scholars offered a more nuanced explanation: ISIS had something to do with Islam, but only as the rebirth of a much-loathed ancient heresy: the Khawarij, or “the Dissenters.” This was an extremely fanatical and violent sect that emerged in the middle of Islam’s first civil war, in the mid-seventh century. Its members condemned

all other Muslims as “infidels” and set upon killing them. No wonder these ancient Dissenters have been abhorred by both Sunni and Shiite Muslims alike, going down in history as an extremely militant offshoot of a great religion.

There was one thing, however, that did not fit this Khawarij analogy: the way ISIS sees itself. The Khawarij were clearly a sect outside Sunnism, the largest denomination of Islam, which makes up of almost 90% of all Muslims. ISIS, however, as evident from all its declarations and publications, did not see itself outside Sunni Islam. Quite the contrary: it perceived itself as the standard bearer of true Sunnism while condemning most other Sunnis, and certainly all Shiites, as “apostates” that deserve to be punished.

No wonder a specific movement within Sunni Islam was designated by ISIS members as the pious precedent to which they are “true heirs.” This was the “blessed Najdi mission,” or Wahhabism as it’s widely known, whose history and ideology is scrutinized in a new book by Cole M. Bunzel: *Wahhābism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement*.

As Bunzel narrates it, the story began in the 1740s in Najd, the geographic center of the Arabian peninsula—hence the term “Najdi mission—which used to be a landlocked backwater until the discovery of oil in the 20th century. Here, a passionate preacher named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) began to spread a new religious awakening: he called all Muslims to strictly abstain from *shirk*, or “polytheism,” and affirm *tawhid*, or “monotheism.”

Now that was a bizarre demand, because Islam itself was born more than a millennium before as a campaign against *shirk*—literally “associating partners” with God—which is the Qur’anic term for the idolatrous religion of pre-Islamic Arabs. This battle was won quickly, during the very life of the Prophet Muhammad (AD c. 570–632), when idolatry was wiped from all Arabia—partly through preaching, partly through conquest. Since then, all Muslims have affirmed the Islamic motto of monotheism, “There is no god but God,” and they certainly have abhorred any manifestation of polytheism.

But for Ibn Wahhab, this historic victory was just an illusion, because most of the Muslims of his time had fallen back into a new kind of *shirk*. What he meant primarily was the popular “cult of saints”: Muslims would visit the graves of saints and prophets and pray there to God, hoping for *tawassul*, or “intercession,” from these great dead men. For most people, this had nothing to do with polytheism. For Ibn Wahhab, however, it was exactly that. So these visitors of graves were no longer Muslims but “grave worshippers.”

That condemnation was just the beginning of Ibn Wahhab’s campaign. Condemning a theological error, let alone merely criticizing it, was not enough. It was also necessary to “show hatred and enmity” to it. Those who failed to demonstrate this zeal failed to be good Muslims, as Ibn Wahhab instructed followers:

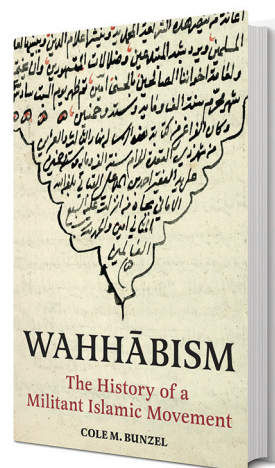
Do not think if you say, “This is the truth. I follow it and I abjure all that is against it, but I will not confront them [i.e., the saints being worshipped] and I will say nothing concerning them,” do not

think that that will profit you. Rather, it is necessary to hate them, to hate those who love them, to revile them, and to show them enmity.

That enmity was to become the basis for the next step: violent jihad. The much-hated “polytheists,” in other words, had to be physically targeted. That is why, as Bunzel defines it aptly, the teachings of Ibn Wahhab would create a movement of “theological exclusivism combined with militant activism.”

A key step in this direction was the historical alliance that Ibn Wahhab created, around the year 1744, with the local ruler of Diriyah, a small town on the outskirts of today’s Riyadh. That ruler was Muhammad bin Su’ud, who embraced all of Ibn Wahhab’s ideas and committed to championing them, leaving behind a long-lasting alliance between his own family, Al Su’ud, and Ibn Wahhab’s family, Al al-Shaykh.

From this alliance emerged what historians call the First Saudi State (1741–1818), which Bunzel examines in a chapter titled, “The Warpath of Early Wahhābism.” Imagining themselves as the only true Muslims, and other Muslims around them as “polytheists,” the forces of Su’ud first engaged in “defensive jihad,” only to escalate later into “offensive jihad.” Among their targets were *al-turk al-kuffar*, or “the infidel Turks,” meaning the Ottoman Empire, which was the Islamic superpower of the time that controlled the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, both which would be captured for several years by Wahhabi forces. Their greatest atrocity was the 1802 attack on the Shiite holy city of Karbala, where “they killed most of its people in the markets and homes,” murdering 2,000 innocents at least, or even as many as 4,500 according to another account.



Wahhābism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement

By Cole M. Bunzel
(Princeton University Press, 2023)



Pro-Muslim Brotherhood protesters in Cairo, 2013

In 1818, this First Saudi State was crushed by Ottoman-allied Egyptian forces. But the Wahhabi mission soon established the Second Saudi State (1824–87), and then the Third Saudi State (1902–32). Only in the latter one, Bunzel shows, did the initial ferocity of the Wahhabi movement finally calm down, largely due to the political pragmatism of the new ruler, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Su'ud, who in 1932 became the first king of modern-day Saudi Arabia. The king needed good relations with other Muslims nations, as well as with “Western oil workers.” So, under his rule, Wahhabi scholars, who also believed in “obeying the ruler” strictly, refrained from condemning other Muslims and condoning violent action. But this pragmatic moderation did not come with much soul-searching about Wahhabism’s initial militancy, which only remained dormant.

This political history of the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance is not new, but Bunzel gives us new details based on primary source materials and weaves them into an interesting story. Even more compelling, perhaps, is how the book maps the place of Wahhabism in the overall Islamic picture. As is well known, there are four established schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam: Hanafi, which is often the most rationalist and flexible, followed by Maliki, Shafi'i, and finally Hanbali, which is often the most textualist and rigid. Unlike other Sunnis, for example, Hanbalis have typically rejected *kalam*, or theology, finding it unnervingly speculative, while they totally shut the door to Greek philosophy, which other Sunnis, as well as Shiites, could at least partly engage with.

So Wahhabism, born in the 18th century, was in fact an offshoot of Hanbalism, which itself was born in the ninth century. But there was a notable stop along the way: the ideas of 13th century Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), which Bunzel covers in a chapter titled “The Taymiyyan Background.” This background is complicated because Ibn Taymiyya was a sophisticated thinker who introduced nuanced ideas about the congruence of reason and revelation, and rejected prevalent Sunni views about a voluntarist

God whose wisdom is beyond comprehension. The troubling part of his legacy was his intolerant verdicts on blasphemy and heresy, and his “severe opposition” to Sufism and the cult of saints. It is this latter part of the Taymiyyan background that the Wahhabis inherited, Bunzel argues, taking them to a much more extreme level.

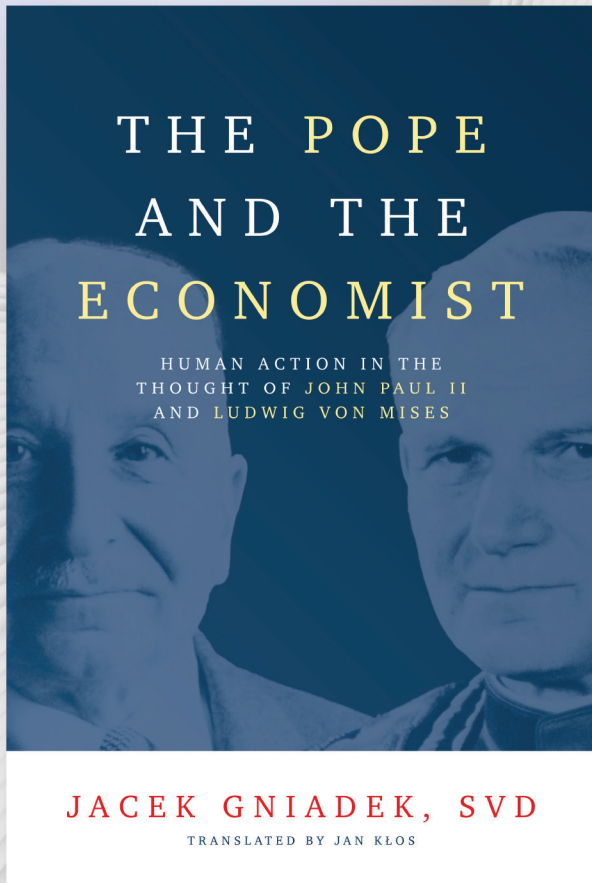
Another theme in the book is the rebirth of “militant Wahhabism” in the second part of the 20th century. By the 1930s, as noted above, Wahhabism had lost much of its early fierceness and become a deeply illiberal but politically meek tradition. In the 1960s, however, a new energy poured in from Egypt with the writings of Sayyid Qutb, who spearheaded a militant offshoot of Egypt’s main Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb’s most radical idea was similar to that of Ibn Wahhab: most contemporary Muslims were not actually Muslims but “polytheists.” Their “infidelity” was not evidenced by the old problem of the cult of saints, though. Qutb was concerned with something new: secularity. By accepting a life under secular laws and rulers, Qutb believed, most Muslims had begun worshipping “idols” that had “usurped God’s divine prerogatives regarding legislation.” This concept of “legal-political *shirk*,” as Bunzel calls it, would become the battle cry of a new trend called “Salafi Jihadism,” whose cascade of militancy would ultimately produce al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Telling this complicated story in accessible prose, *Wahhabism* is a fine book worth reading by anyone interested in the history of ideas in Islam. As a Muslim, I drew two opposite lessons from it. On the one hand, those who use terrorist groups like ISIS to depict a dark picture about all Islam are dead wrong. Terrorists represent only the most extreme version of the most rigid interpretation of Islam.

On the other hand, ISIS and its ilk, as well as their forerunners in the First Saudi State, serve as warnings of a dangerous idea that can contaminate any religion: the definition of piety as self-righteous hatred for the impious, the heretic, the infidel—instead of a righteous compassion for them. It is a poison that can wreak much havoc not just between religions but also within the very religion itself, as the “Najdi mission” painfully demonstrated. **RL**

Mustafa Akyol is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute focusing on Islam and modernity, an affiliate scholar at the Acton Institute, and the author of Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance.

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Raphael's *School of Athens*, depicting Plato and Aristotle (1509–1511)

On a Conservative Humanism

The pathologies of our day, stemming from both the cosmopolitan left and the nationalist right, can be healed only with a return to the trinity of religion, family, and education.

by RICHARD M. REINSCH II

IN THEIR LEARNED BOOK, *The Wisdom of Our Ancestors: Conservative Humanism and the Western Tradition*, Graham James McAleer and Alexander S. Rosenthal-Pubul ask: What is the wisdom of our ancestors? Answers to this question figure into how conservatives and classical liberals confront progressivism's ongoing depredations and its most recent goal of centralizing private capital and property around ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) objectives. Of course, these objectives are defined by billionaire investors and multinational institutions as a global good against the supposed depredations of capitalism. What we might call conservatism, or just "the right," is itself divided about how to contest progressivism and a certain cosmopolitanism, seen in "Davos Man," EU politics, and transnational institutions like the

United Nations, etc. That split, our authors contend, is between liberal conservatism and nationalism.

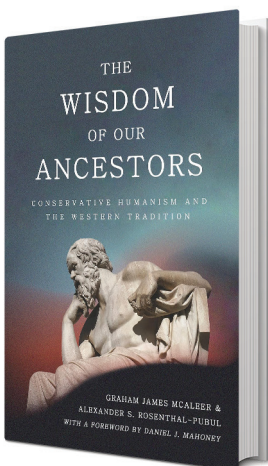
The authors argue for a conservative humanism that, when understood in the full light of Western thought, is built on the trinity of religion, family, and education. These institutions are rooted in our relational personhood and should elicit from people a noble and dignified life, one where we live well with our freedom. Conservative humanism recognizes these institutions and guarantees them because they are necessary to civilization itself. Other goods are also of significance, such as establishments, i.e., the need for professions, ceremony, honors, forms of behavior and dress. Our authors are clear in the book, contra to contemporary demotic rage, that populism and its devaluation of establishments cannot be the

final word for anyone wishing to challenge progressivism or modern liberalism.

But the book is not concerned ultimately with contemporary politics, even though it doesn't hesitate to note how certain intellectual deformations have led to the bizarre outcomes we currently endure. Rather, it underscores that conservatism conserves and expresses the view that our human nature is constituted by certain truths, flourishes under certain norms of liberty and virtue, requires a restrained and dignified politics, and also is in need of commerce and its creativity, which employs persons in an ever-increasing division of labor.

In fact, a particularly delightful part of the book is its insistence in chapter 5 that commercial society is ennobling, social, and unites town and country, owners and laborers, and the diverse parts of human communities in exchanges of labor for goods and services. Beyond basic needs, our innate desire for beauty and costume, luxury and games, drives forward the work of commerce, propelling the division of labor. Adam Smith's value, the authors argue, is in his ability to understand political economy's elastic capacity to enrich people and nations, and to uncover how it decorates human nature.

Conservative humanism combines ancient and classical notions of reason and virtue, combined with the Christian faith's insistence on charity, devotion to God, and the stunning revolution of human dignity and equality that emerges from the Incarnation. We could call this Christian humanism. But our authors, to their credit, further insist that modernity's contributions in the forms of commerce, scientific and medical



The Wisdom of Our Ancestors: Conservative Humanism and the Western Tradition

By Graham James McAleer and Alexander S. Rosenthal-Pubul

(University of Notre Dame, 2023)



Statue of Cicero at the old Palace of Justice in Rome

advances, and the early Enlightenment's insistence on reason, properly understood, constitute essential aspects of conservative humanism. Another part of this achievement is constitutionalism, as articulated by modern thought, which contributes to preserving individual rights and the durability of our nations.

The book spans intriguing commentaries on numerous figures in the pantheon of conservative humanism: Roger Scruton, Edmund Burke, Erich Przywara, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, Cicero, Adam Smith, Eric Voegelin, Pope Benedict XVI, Pierre Manent, and Aurel Kolnai, among others. To these authors we can look for a sustained meditation on how conservative humanism upholds understandings of freedom, anthropology, natural law, commerce, and nation against errant articulations by modern liberalism. One example of such error is the reduction of freedom to license or will. Another is the reduction of human nature to purely material form, devoid of the truths of subjecthood or consciousness, unable to know the truth about anything.

McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul argue that "the real problem is the Enlightenment's 'modern self-limitation of reason,' evident in the positivist and materialist doctrines of the period." Here is the first error of what the authors, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, call "the second Enlightenment." The second error is that the source of rights stems not from natural law or natural right but from man's progressive ability to shape himself by his own subjectivity. As our authors observe, "The abandonment of natural right

generates the crisis of liberalism, which no longer believes in any overarching Good, but only in the right of each individual to determine the good for himself or herself.”

This conception of reason intended to soar beyond a tragic sense of human nature found in both classical and Christian thought. Man, properly understood, is engaged in a progressive project, a “Gnostic project of emancipation from establishment.” But this project, which wanted to exalt human reason, comes to negate the authority of reason to know the truth about the enduring questions and dialogues of human life. Rousseau’s contribution is highlighted by the authors because he articulates that “rights now express not a common nature, but an ideal of individual subjectivity.” One doesn’t have to press things too far to understand how this will turn against the notion of human dignity, which becomes essentially meaningless, incapable of any real grounding. The modern delimitation of reason reduces man to part of a whole, eliminating freedom and virtue.

This reductionism is ultimately what is wrong with both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, with each pole representing a different form of this deformation. This is evidenced by a nationalism that finds meaning arising only from state membership and power. For this form of nationalism, the authors intone, conservative humanism has no sympathy for or connection to intellectually. Alternatively, cosmopolitanism’s inhumanity arises from seeing personhood located finally nowhere, divorced from home, family, community, and faith. Our hope and meaning becomes what exactly?

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**THE MODERN
DELIMITATION OF
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We require home, establishment, memory, and a certain love for the country we were raised in. The authors look to Thomas Aquinas and his notion of *pietas* to defend this patriotism or, to use Pierre Manent’s phrase, national loyalty. We should naturally embrace and have a devotion to our country. In defending “conservative humanism as a political middle between individualism and nationalism,” the authors necessarily defend the individual in the differentiated dimensions of his nature. As they say, “liberals are right to point out this emphasis,” and conservative humanism “must affirm the individual as much as liberalism.” But we must also “account for coordination among individuals.”

In developing the case for why we should have Aquinas’ *pietas*, McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul look to the Dominican’s rich metaphysical account of individuals who possess a nature, a “pattern,” and “like attributes.” What are the patterns per Aquinas? “The world over it is the same: a home, with family fed, healthy, and competent, and friendship among the generations.” There is also belonging in various forms of membership and the “identity” that comes from that membership. Our authors also stress that ritual worship is a necessary human practice, for both community and “personal continuity.” Scruton expresses that the nation provides the law, land, and forms of membership and identity we need as persons. Love of country is therefore the mark of health and flourishing; its absence is a mark of an anti-human politics and culture.

To hate home is to embrace the pathology of *oikophobia*. But in our national loyalty, we do not

The Wounded Angel by Hugo Simberg (1903)



marginalize or dismiss other nations and their qualities. We tend to the garden of our own country and hope that others will do the same.

Conservative humanism must also thread “its way between angelism and vitalism,” pathologies that have factored into modern western misery. Both approaches voice a fundamental misunderstanding of the human person and locate man as either a pure spirit, an angel, a being without a nature (angelism), or man as the “shrunk self” of materialism (vitalism). The former may perhaps best be observed in Fukuyamian liberalism, which sees the consummation of equality in liberal democracy as it becomes a truly global phenomenon. What about our limitations as mortal beings, located in places, dependent upon particular peoples, shaped by relationships and obligations? Do all these just get replaced with a global liberal ethos of equality and the endless movement of goods and peoples? Are we angels? Conservative humanism defends equality under law and the commercial society but based on the embodied human person, dignified by the order of nature and grace and one who works and trades to flourish as a relational person in family and community.

Vitalism expresses the view that there is no human nature because there is no overall nature of order and reason. One of the most consequential proponents of this view is Martin Heidegger, who returned to Greek philosophy and Homeric literature and found not reason and natural right, as Leo Strauss did, but violence and exaltation of victors. The West, Heidegger famously argued, had erred by following Plato and Aristotle: there was no truth of nature, but there was the mastery by individuals of competitive situations.

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**CONSERVATIVE
HUMANISM MUST
THREAD ‘ITS WAY
BETWEEN ANGELISM
AND VITALISM.’**
”



René Guénon (1886–1951)

Being is not a participation in Essence, as argued by Aquinas, but is locked in a constant appearing—that is, we must fight against a backdrop of chaos to appear in glory. This means that human existence is defined by struggle and risk. Heidegger’s enthrallment with a metaphysics of glory through victory means that “I show myself, I appear, I step into the light....Glory is the repute in which one stands.”

This isn’t merely an intellectual lesson in Heideggerian and, for that matter, Nietzschean thought, but has clear resonance in certain emerging strands of alt right and nationalist thinking that on similar grounds dismisses both reason and God, equality of persons, and the pluralism of civil society within republican government. The French New Right, the authors outline, prominently voices these perspectives, in more popular form, in opposing, for example, the ongoing migration crisis. This movement is led by Alain de Benoist, who opposes what he labels the component parts of Western universalism: liberalism, Christianity, and colonialism. He contends for the “concretely rooted people” and for “ethnopluralism.” Division of persons by race and culture becomes the new universalism. There is somehow a discrete and given ordering of peoples that must be respected and enforced.

Another thinker in this vein is René Guénon, who articulates a return to the beginning of spirituality, which he calls “Traditions” or a “mystical intuition” that is “truly intellectual.” Much of this amounts to a

syncretistic eastern spirituality that forms authentic traditional culture, Guénon believes. All religions, save for Judaism and Christianity, we are told, amount to the same and should be formative of all aspects of a people. This form, Guénon asserts, is essentially the same everywhere despite the various manifestations it might take in the myths and rituals of people. All legitimate groupings participate in this Tradition. The enemy, in this view, becomes the dialogue of reason and revelation, freedom and responsibility, individualism and coordination, which demythologizes Tradition with the imputed error of *logos*. This cast of mind sets itself against conservative humanism and can easily undergird romantic nationalism.

One of the best discussions in the book concerns the perennial argument about the nature of freedom. The authors rightly note that Fukuyama's famous argument regarding the end of history culminating in liberal political order is a philosophy of history. This philosophy sees human striving for recognition receiving vindication in individual equality provided by political liberalism. Fukuyama's modern liberal appropriation of both G.W.F. Hegel and Alexandre Kojève, the authors observe, gives pride of place to individual freedom, politically, economically, and socially. And this can be seen in Fukuyama's recent beefs with identity politics, which he rightly recognizes as a threat to a decent liberal order because it dethrones the sovereign individual and puts in its place the racial and gender collective as the locus of political decision-making.

McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul, though, find Fukuyama's well-known modern understanding of liberty to be a deficient one in the face of the identity

Portrait of G. W. F. Hegel by Jakob Schlesinger (1831)



politics challenge because it cannot really answer the question of “Why freedom?” Fukuyama enlists conceptions of negative freedom to defend liberalism and individualism. But conservative humanism answers that the connection between virtue and freedom is integral to human flourishing. The authors don't turn their back on modern constitutional protections to liberty, coming as those do in the form of negative liberty. They stress that the tremendous freedoms that are ours must be exercised well and to the end of human excellence or we will struggle to see even their purpose. The authors walk us through classical, Stoic, and Christian understandings of freedom, putting this into synthesis as the freedom to do good by overcoming self-centered passions. Christianity, of course, adds that we stand in need of grace to overcome the wound of original sin. Natural and theological virtue need one another.

The deeper contribution is that Christianity rips asunder the Aristotelian relationship of person to polis as limbs to the body. In stressing that the person's origin and salvation come from God, who is higher than the state, Christianity empties the state of any capacity to define citizens in the comprehensive meaning of the pagan state. Edmund Burke's attacks on anti-Catholic penal laws in Ireland were built on this point as he rooted his opposition in the spirit of Christianity and the civil law.

But Burke also takes issue with modern liberal conceptions of liberty when he claims, “What is liberty without virtue and wisdom? It is the greatest of all possible evils: for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint.” Returning to conservative humanism's trinity of religion, family, and education: without these institutions “to educate members of the community in habits of moral virtue,” negative liberty becomes difficult to enjoy. Our worthy modern liberty needs these “intermediate” institutions to “foster freedom” with “virtuous self-mastery.” What is playing out in our time is something else entirely, more akin to Dostoevskian sentiment: we start with a desire for perfect freedom but find ourselves in the conditions of anarchy and despotism. **RL**

Richard M. Reinsch II is editor-in-chief and director of publications for the American Institute for Economic Research, and a senior writer at Law & Liberty. He is coauthor, with Peter Augustine Lawler, of *A Constitution in Full: Recovering the Unwritten Foundation of American Liberty*.



A Jesuit Britain?

Did Spanish Scholastic thinkers influence British liberalism more than we think? Yes and no.

by EDWARD FESER

ACCORDING TO A STILL-FAMILIAR narrative, European intellectual life before the rise of modern philosophy and science was stagnant, dominated by Scholastics who simply reiterated stale medieval ideas, which were themselves regurgitations of ancient Aristotelian and biblical themes. Individual geniuses like Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes finally dared to sweep aside this intellectual rubbish and build new edifices of thought from scratch.

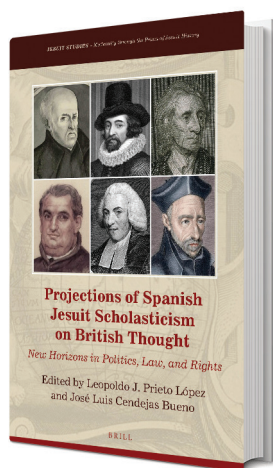
This basic story survives in pop intellectual history, but academic historians of thought have long known that it's a myth. In reality, not only the medievals but also the late Scholastics who mediated their ideas to the early moderns were often men of brilliance and creativity. And in reality, while the early moderns did indeed reject some key ideas of the late Scholastics, they also learned from and built

on others. Etienne Gilson was an early expositor of the Scholastic influences on Descartes, and contemporary historians of philosophy such as Dennis Des Chene, Helen Hattab, and Walter Ott have described in detail the complicated relationship between late Scholastic and early modern philosophy. William A. Wallace and Edward Grant are among those who have traced the connections between medieval and modern science.

Another area of Scholastic influence on early modern thought that has attracted contemporary academic interest concerns matters of politics, law, and economics. For example, scholars like Brian Tierney and Annabel Brett have traced the origins of the modern idea of individual rights to medieval canon law and the Dominican thinkers of the Spanish "School of Salamanca."

Leopoldo Prieto López and José Luis Cendejas Bueno's anthology, *Projections of Spanish Jesuit Scholasticism on British Thought*, is an important new contribution to the recovery of this late Scholastic heritage. As the title indicates, the focus is on the Jesuit representatives of late Scholasticism specifically. Most of the essays in the volume pay special attention to Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), though there is also much of interest on other Spanish Jesuits, such as José de Acosta (1540–1600) and Juan de Mariana (1536–1624). On the British side, John Locke (1632–1704) perhaps has the starring role, though several other important thinkers are treated, including Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Algernon Sidney (1622–1683), and Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859). Bringing the story closer to the present day, there is even a treatment of Scholastic influences on Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), though given his Catholicism, Scholastic influence is less surprising here than it is in the case of the other (Protestant) writers.

Certainly the idea of Bacon and Locke as conduits of Jesuitry into England is jarring. But, of course, influence does not entail agreement, and with some thinkers the influence was not deep in any case, even if not without significance. For example, as one essay in the volume recounts, Bacon respected and made use of Acosta's work in natural history—in particular, on the climate of the New World, the tides in the Atlantic Ocean, and the like. This was so despite Bacon's famous hostility toward the Aristotelian conception of nature and of our scientific knowledge of it, which Scholastics like Acosta upheld. But while Bacon's taking account of a Scholastic's empirical data is an interesting bit of



Projections of Spanish Jesuit Scholasticism on British Thought: New Horizons in Politics, Law, and Rights

Edited by Leopoldo J. Prieto López and José Luis Cendejas Bueno (Brill, 2023)

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THE IDEA OF BACON AND LOCKE AS CONDUITS OF JESUITRY INTO ENGLAND IS JARRING.



intellectual history, it does not amount to an influence at the level of philosophical principle. The comparison is nevertheless of value, however, for as the same chapter points out, though the philosophical matrix into which Bacon wanted to fit this empirical data was *different* from Acosta's, it was not necessarily as well worked out.

As another essay in the volume reports, De Quincey, like the Jesuit Scholastics, emphasized the importance of casuistry (the application of general ethical principles to a variety of particular cases) to reasoning about morality, and esteemed these Scholastics' general project of constructing a casuistic system. All the same, he criticized the specific way they carried out this project. It was in his view too deeply influenced by Catholic considerations, such as the needs of the confessional (where a priest may have to offer the penitent advice related to the specific kinds of sins likely to come up in that context). De Quincey's own favored approach was guided by the moral system of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) rather than the natural law theory of the Scholastics. As with Bacon, the Scholastic influence did not run deep, and the differences remain more significant than the commonalities.

Something similar can be said of the Scholastic impact on English mathematician John Wallis (1616–1703), who engaged with Suárez's views on the relationship between material substance and quantity and borrowed his notion of “distinctions of reason.” Such influence was real but limited. However, there are also cases of stronger continuities between the Jesuit Scholastics and English Protestant thinkers. As is indicated by the subtitle of Prieto López and Cendejas Bueno's volume (“New Horizons in Politics, Law, and Rights”), it is in political philosophy especially that this Jesuit influence can be felt, and most of the essays are devoted to elaborating



Francisco Suárez (1548–1617)

on that theme. Here is where Suárez is especially important (as is Robert Bellarmine [1542–1621], albeit he was Italian rather than Spanish). Suárez's account of resistance to tyranny produced echoes in Sidney. Along with Suárez's notions of subjective right (the moral claim over what is one's own or what is owed to one); of the institution of property; and of rulers as properly attaining their offices by popular consent, it also has obvious echoes in Locke. Several essays discuss these parallels in detail.

To some extent these are more than just echoes but reflect the direct influence of Jesuit writers on British thought. Sometimes this fact was wielded as a cudgel, with Tory critics accusing the Whigs of peddling an essentially papist set of doctrines. For that reason, the deployment of ideas like Suárez's against the absolutism of writers like Robert Filmer was sometimes covert, since open acknowledgment of their Spanish Jesuit provenance would have been politically disadvantageous.

All the same, here too it is important to emphasize that there were crucial differences, and not only continuities, between Scholastics like Suárez and Bellarmine on

the one hand and the British republican and liberal traditions on the other. For example, Sidney's account of the human condition is more pessimistic than that of Aristotelian natural law theorists like Suárez, and reminiscent of the state of nature as conceived of by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), a “war of every man against every man.” Furthermore, Suárez's account of the circumstances under which rulers can be resisted is more nuanced and hedged with qualifications than Sidney's. Sidney, for instance, equates the usurper of political power and the ruler who has become a tyrant, whereas Suárez carefully distinguishes the cases and is much more cautious about resistance to the latter.

Moreover, Suárez maintains the traditional Aristotelian position that society and the governmental authority it requires are natural to human beings rather than the product of contract. The specific form of government and who specifically occupies its offices may be determined by popular consent. But society and government themselves as institutions are not the product of any social contract. Hence Suárez is not committed to a “state of nature” theory of the kind familiar from the liberal tradition in political philosophy.

Despite the liberal influences on Belloc, the harmony between his views and Suárez's is much greater—unsurprisingly, given that Catholicism and Thomism held even greater sway with him. As an essay in the volume notes, among the themes common to Scholastic writers and Belloc are that social order exists for the sake of perfecting the individuals who make it up, that the rationale of the institution of property relates to the needs of the family specifically, that there is a common good reflective of our nature as social animals that is more than just the aggregate of individual goods, and that the demands of morality and economic rationality are closely linked. These elements of Belloc's “distributism” contrast with the tendency of liberal writers to think of the individual rather than the family as the basic unit of society, to favor a state that is neutral between the ends individuals might happen to pursue, to deny that the state should pursue a good higher than the aggregate of these ends, and to distinguish questions of economic rationality from questions about morality.

In other ways, too, the extent to which Scholastics like Suárez might be enlisted in the liberal cause—and especially the classical liberal or libertarian cause—should not be exaggerated. A chapter on Suárez's account of the morality of taxation is instructive.

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THE EXTENT TO WHICH SCHOLASTICS LIKE SUÁREZ MIGHT BE ENLISTED IN THE LIBERAL CAUSE SHOULD NOT BE EXAGGERATED.

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In a detailed treatment, Suárez argues that only the highest authority in a polity, and not intermediate authorities, should impose taxes. And he holds, with qualifications, that taxes must be used for the stated purpose for which they were imposed. On the other hand, he also holds that it is legitimate to tax even the poor for necessary expenses and not just for luxuries, albeit he allows that in practice it is better to avoid doing so when possible. He argues—perhaps surprisingly, given the role he gives to popular consent in choosing a form of government—that the ruler does not need such consent in order to impose a tax. He holds that there is a moral obligation to pay taxes, although he acknowledges the force of the view that such an obligation ceases when taxes are too burdensome. And he argues that, in deciding about whether one is obligated to pay a tax, one should not rely on one’s own judgment but seek the advice of a confessor or another learned and prudent person.

Certainly one could take a less austere view of the ethics of taxation, as some in the Scholastic tradition have. But the issue illustrates how the implications of Suárez’s principles in particular, and of those he shares with other Scholastics more generally, are not always obvious where very specific moral questions are concerned.

It goes without saying that the thinkers and themes addressed in *Projections of Spanish Jesuit Scholasticism on British Thought* are of great significance to the study of modern intellectual history. But it must be emphasized that they are also of more than merely historical interest. In recent years, there has been in conservative intellectual circles an

increasingly visible and heated controversy over the nature and merits of the classical liberal tradition. On one side, there are those who take the greatest representatives of classical liberalism—from Locke to Adam Smith to F.A. Hayek—to have made a real advance in our theoretical understanding of human rights and the political and economic orders, which can and should be smoothly incorporated into a genuinely conservative political philosophy. The “fusionism” that has defined much modern American conservatism (which aims to combine religion and traditional morality with a broadly libertarian approach to economics and the functions of government) reflects this point of view.

On the other side, there are conservatives who, while they may acknowledge the virtues of certain institutions that have come to be associated with classical liberalism (such as the rule of law, limited government, and the market economy), do not accept philosophical principles of the kind characteristic of classical liberal political theory. For example, they reject the idea that society and political authority derive from contract or consent rather than nature. And some of them reject, too, the supposition that the state ought ideally to be neutral between religious traditions. This position has come to be known as “postliberalism”—the idea being that liberal principle is not something conservatives should try to conserve but rather something they should work to transcend.

Understanding thinkers like Bellarmine and Suárez is crucial to adjudicating the dispute between the postliberals and their critics. For conservatives sympathetic to classical liberalism, these Scholastics point the way toward combining a traditional Aristotelian and Thomistic natural law approach to ethics and politics with classical liberal principles. For postliberals, by contrast, precisely because these thinkers are *pre*-liberal, they provide a way of seeing what a *post*-liberal political philosophy might look like. And insofar as their views would allow us to uphold institutions like the rule of law, private property, limited government, and the like without committing ourselves to the philosophical principles of Locke and company, they indicate that a post-liberal politics would not necessarily be an illiberal politics. ■

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Calvin, Loyola, Rabelais: A Murder Mystery

Gathered around a murder victim are the father of Calvinism, the founder of the Jesuits, and the man who inspired the epithet *Rabelaisian*. Father Brown was never this interesting.

by SALLY THOMAS

TRANSFORMATIVE IS A tired word, maybe, for the kind of thing art does, and not really the right word. When we say that we're *changed* by a story, or a poem, or a play, what we mean is that we're made in some way more aware, awake, alive. Good art doesn't pretend to change the world: not from something into something else. We simply know more clearly what's real and who we are in that reality. Like children in a fairy tale, we return from our imagination's adventure changed, but only into something more truly like ourselves.

Jane Clark Scharl's remarkable play, *Sonnez Les Matines*, engages this paradox of imaginative renewal

as a Christian vision for art by invoking the particular paradox of liturgical time as a frame for dramatic action. Secular time moves inexorably forward, a linear sequence of discrete days. But for the Christian, the year is a story, unified, completed, accomplished in the fact of the Resurrection, though it repeats itself endlessly until the end of time. Because we inhabit this world of time and change, we have to wait for the seasons to swing around again in their sequential course. Caught in time, changed by it, older every year, we enter each mystery as it comes and, if we allow its grace to work on us, are restored anew to ourselves. Only by measuring and experiencing time

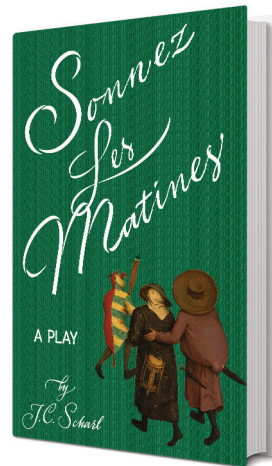
in this way, trusting in its cyclical form, can we begin to imagine eternity and ourselves in it.

This tension between linear and cyclical understandings of time finds a reflection in the playwright's decision to set her drama in verse, not prose. Throughout the play, the poetic line, with its breaks, juxtaposes itself against the forward impulse of the characters' utterances. Where a sentence says, *I need to complete my thought*, the line says, *Whatever else is going on, I am complete*. Where in secular time we speak of cause and effect, action and consequence, one thing following and completing another in sequence, liturgical time points us to the renewal of all things as a thing already accomplished. Inhabiting physical bodies in a temporal world, we experience this *fait accompli* in fragments, often messily. Yet, if we are Christian, we believe with St. Paul in his epistle to the Colossians that Christ "holds all creation together in himself."

This understanding of reality is what holds together the world of Scharl's play. *Sonnez Les Matines* happens in a historical moment simultaneously specific and ambiguous: the brief hours between the ringing of the bells for Vespers and again for Matins, but all we know beyond that is that it's "sometime in the 1520s." Martin Luther has already nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. The Christian world is in upheaval. But in the play's smaller world, with its compressed time, all that matters is that at the last gasp of Carnival, in a city both beautiful and squalid, three friends are complicit in a crime.

The crime is a murder, committed before the play's action opens. The stabbing of a young woman in a fetid alleyway is the original sin with which Scharl's trinity of characters must grapple. But the problem the play itself confronts isn't the problem of sin. That problem, as the drama makes clear, is one for theologians, a problem to which systems of theology strive to make consistent answers. The play's central problem, on the other hand, is the problem of the Christian artist: how to tell a story that points to a perfect God, in eternity, without compromising any truth in its representation of a fallen world.

For the law student Jean Cauvin, whom we know better as John Calvin, the world in its fallenness is a hopelessly defiled form. Jean mistrusts all its material forms, even the elements of the Eucharist: "sometimes I wonder just / what is meant by the body



Sonnez Les Matines

By Jane Clark Scharl
(Wiseblood Books, 2023)

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**FOR THE LAW
STUDENT JEAN
CAUVIN, THE WORLD
IN ITS FALLENNESS
IS A HOPELESSLY
DEFILED FORM.**

”

/ and what signifies the blood.” He doesn't ask what these elements *mean*, but what *signifies* them, what gives them meaning, when they belong to a world riven from its maker. Signaling his sense of alienation from Christ, the eternal Logos, Jean mistrusts even the verse forms that are his language, lapsing in and out of blank verse and soliloquizing in blocks of prose. He mistrusts, too, the renewal implicit in liturgical time. “All these trails,” he declares, “that lead out from the hearts and minds of men / lead only to one place: death.” The guilt he telegraphs as a response to the murdered girl is an existential guilt. Trapped in a defiled world with its remorseless time, he doubts his own salvation. At enmity even with his own body, which “flaps” around him like an ill-fitting cloak, and so at enmity with all the embodied-ness of creation, he believes that his only hope lies not in the possibility of change—in his universe there is no

change—but in discovering, on the day of resurrection, that by the luck of some cosmic draw he hasn't been, after all, the damned soul he fears he is.

The young Ignatius of Loyola, soldier turned theology student, has lost his heirloom knife. This knife of the Loyolas, beautifully wrought, “reveals God’s gleaming nature.” Discovering the knife beside the murdered woman’s body, sullied with her blood, Ignatius asks, “Do we leave no device of God unstained?” *Device* here could mean *implement*, or it could mean *method*. Either way, in Ignatius’ view of reality, as in Jean’s, the problem is a fundamental divide between God’s purposes and those of his creation. Where Jean views redemption as a matter wholly of God’s choice, Ignatius believes in human agency, the capacity for change. The bloodstained blade may be wiped and polished. The sinner may seek confession. This is the burden of Ignatius’ final speech. The Matins bells herald the end of Carnival, with all its sins of the flesh—and not a moment too soon. “The bells / call us to confession, now, / before the feast is ended.” What has been done in Carnival will be undone—*must* be undone—in the penances of Lent. For Ignatius, this is the story the Christian year tells.

Depiction of Christ’s resurrection, 12th-century Austria



Photo courtesy Ancient Art and Architecture / Alamy Stock Photo



Holy Trinity by Hendrick van Balen the Elder (c. 1620)

In a lesser imagining, this play would involve two allegorical characters, not three. The Calvinist and the Catholic, dialectically opposed, would argue, and one or the other of them would win all the arguments. Too often, that’s precisely what Christian attempts at art turn out to be: a thinly fictionalized apologetics exercise, whose whole point is that one thing is wrong and another is right. Instead, Jane Scharl has imagined these two seemingly opposed characters as united in the limits of their vision. “Should I be ashamed,” asks Ignatius in scene 2, “to seek to change my nature?” Jean exhorts him to despair of his capacity to “turn this ruin / of a man, a bodied thing, to good.” But, counters Ignatius, though God is unchanging, and we can’t say “we are free in some way He is not,” God himself took a body, lived in it, died in it, raised it from the dead and took it back into the Trinity. “Do you say God changed?” Jean flashes back at him. Ignatius’ reply: “I don’t say that. But it does not seem / He stayed the same.”

Though their theological systems oppose each other superficially, it’s telling that this exchange plays out, for both speakers, in blank verse. Even in disagreement, on some deep level they speak the same language. Each character, in his own way, believes that created things—the body, chiefly—have been made by sin fundamentally alien to their creator. What they try to reconcile, by some system of rational thought, is the reality of a redemptive God, a Word made flesh, with the utter alienation of the material world.

Where they both fall short is in failing to imagine, as the most real reality, God's existence outside time. The impulse by which Jean imagines fate as a ball of yarn being wound up, while Ignatius imagines it as embroidery on a blank sheet, is the impulse to say, *First this happened, then that happened*. Both conceptualize salvation as a linear, sequential narrative, with more or less "give" in its unspooling. What they don't envision is an entire extratemporal economy. Both seek to *explain*, rationally, something eternal and mysterious. Both, ultimately, fail to *imagine*.

Enter François Rabelais, the necessary third person of this human trinity and the play's real hero, not least because his presence disrupts the limited and limiting theological dialectic. Running, covered with blood, a total-body wallower in the mess and chaos of human life, he erupts onto the stage. Fastidious Jean remarks that the blood on François' clothing "burns," as if already the inevitable hellfire were starting to consume him. "A *stained hood* is one slip from a *sainthood*," François fires back. Like all his jokes, this one is serious, a statement of faith. "The resurrection of the body" or "the resurrection of the bawdy?" They both sound the same. Why would they not mean the same? François is the one character who trusts the forms of this world to be both what they appear and more than what they appear. Of the three characters, he speaks consistently in meter and rhyme, trusting the formal shape to hold the creation of his language, sacred and profane, together in itself.

Outrageous as he appears, François alone trusts that reality is sacramental, more than the sum of its mangled material parts. Even the all-too-human blood that marks his clothes has a sacramental character, having flowed from a body that, for all the

marks which time and experience have left on it, still bears the image of God. Looking on the naked body of the murdered woman, François alone of the three perceives her in her dignity. He knows her name: *Manon*, a diminutive of Mary, the Mother of God. In his gaze, this Mary's bodily perfection lies in the identifying changes that sin and time have wrought, the marks of childbirth, the story her body tells, even in death.

Looking on her death, François perceives her life. She has not ceased to be a person with a name. The historical Rabelais, as the critic Mikhail Bakhtin has said, understood timelessness in terms of the body's elemental cycles, chiefly the cycles of eating and defecating, and of sex. In Scharl's Christian imagination, this paradox becomes the paradox of the "Happy Fault," in which both fall and redemption form an entire, holy reality, clear in the eye of God. That eye does not perceive the fallen Manon apart from the sinless Mary, but even as it sees them distinctly, makes a unity of them.

The work of Christian art, as François' character suggests, is to strive toward imagining that vision. Its trajectory doesn't move from problem to resolution, from conflict to reconciliation, from ignorance to understanding, from sin to grace. Those moves aren't what make art Christian. They might not even be what make it art. As this play closes, it's hard to say that any one of the characters knows something he didn't know before. Has he been transformed in any way, other than to grow a few hours older? Again, it's hard to say. Each man has articulated who he is and what kind of world he thinks he lives in. Perhaps he knows himself better for having done so. And perhaps that's all he needs to know.

But François has the last word. As the Matins bells ring, Jean abandons his friends in the muck, to seek the "terror" of grace for himself. Ignatius thinks of confession, where he hopes to leave his muck behind. Left alone, François declares, "In the muck's the stuff / of ourselves." The fallen flesh is not God's enemy, or our own. "The world is ours," he says—all of it, the mess, the chaos, the death, held together mysteriously by its maker—"ours, to save, or to throw away." **RL**

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**THE HISTORICAL
RABELAIS UNDERSTOOD
TIMELESSNESS IN
TERMS OF THE BODY'S
ELEMENTAL CYCLES.**

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Sally Thomas is a poet and fiction writer whose work has appeared in the New Yorker, First Things, the New Republic, Plough Quarterly, Public Discourse, and Southern Poetry Review, among other publications. She is currently associate poetry editor for the New York Sun.



CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Jonathan Leaf

Q You're a playwright in New York City with a conservative sensibility. What obstacles have you encountered that more left-leaning artists would not have?

The issues have less to do with political ideology and more to do with identity politics. I actually received an email a while back from an important figure in the theater saying something to the effect of: we're not doing plays by "cis" heterosexual white males now. People working in theater tend to be idealists, and they believe in the idea of opening up to new voices. So this is largely motivated by idealism, even if it may be misplaced. Let me give you an example. During the last few years, there have been a series of mediocre plays presented on Broadway written by young black playwrights. Millions of dollars were spent on these,

and the producers lost almost every penny. This is what an objective person would expect, as black audiences for Broadway dramas are small, and it isn't easy to make money on Broadway even with a good play. But the producers were acting out of idealism, not cynicism. However, they may not have been helping the theater much.

Q The 2019 play *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* was described in the *New York Times* as a "red-state unicorn," in that it was a serious, fair, even sympathetic look at conservative Catholics wrestling with contemporary issues. Do you see anything similar around these days or on the horizon? If not on the stage, what about in film? Streaming TV series?

I'm sure there is. It's hard to know about everything that's happening, and I might not be an authority. In the movie business, you can clearly see that there's a hunger for movies with mainstream and patriotic messages. You can see that in everything from *Top Gun: Maverick* to *Sound of Freedom*. Regarding the theater, I think it's worth noting that two of the most respected contemporary playwrights—Tom Stoppard and David Mamet—have expressed support at times for conservative politicians. But neither tends to write didactic plays. And to my mind, that's a good thing. Plays written to serve an ideology—like those of Clifford Odets—tend to be dopey and to date quickly.

Q Your novel *City of Angles*, which has been widely praised and described as a Hollywood noir, takes on L.A. and the filmmaking community. What was the motivation to go there? Any personal experience?

I wanted to write a novel that described how people on the periphery of the industry, especially actors and actresses, experienced daily life. For some reason, hardly anyone seems to have done that of late. At the same time, I wanted to do that in a fun, entertaining way. I wasn't aiming to criticize Los Angeles. I like the city. The phoniness in the business is astonishing, but L.A. has an awful lot to offer. It's not just the weather. It has smart people, excellent museums, great restaurants, a fine symphony, a good opera company, and a thousand other things to recommend it.

Q What advice would you offer a young playwright who is conservative, perhaps religious, and wants to work in the mainstream, to perhaps see his or her name in lights on Broadway (or Off-Broadway)?

The theater is not in a healthy state. Most writers getting their first plays staged are doing this as a calling card for work in television and film. Sad, but true. That's irrespective of their political or religious views. The MFA programs are turning out some good playwrights, but they're a bad training ground inasmuch as they keep young dramatists cloistered and away from interesting experiences. And I sincerely doubt that they would be terribly embracing of religious conservatives. I suspect that Yale Drama would be as accepting of a 21st-century Paul Claudel as Puritan New England was of witches.

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Q What book(s) have you read at least three times, and why?

The only novel I have ever read three times all the way through is *The Great Gatsby*. Reading a novel takes a lot of effort when you know how it turns out! And why read a book you've read before when there are all those you haven't read? There's a terrific short nonfiction book on why people join cults and mass movements called *The True Believer* by Eric Hoffer that I'm sure I've read that many times.

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

The Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City.

Q What's your favorite B&W film, and why?

Tough question. I think what film does best is comedy. So I might say *The Philadelphia Story*, although *His Girl Friday* and *Manhattan* are other possibilities. Some serious black-and-white movies I love are *La Dolce Vita*, *Notorious*, *Rashomon*, and *Rules of the Game*. In terms of combining ambition with artistry, it's tough to surpass *La Dolce Vita*. **RL**

Jonathan Leaf is a playwright and novelist. Kirkus Reviews called his new novel, City of Angles, a mystery set in Los Angeles, "light, literary entertainment at its best."

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