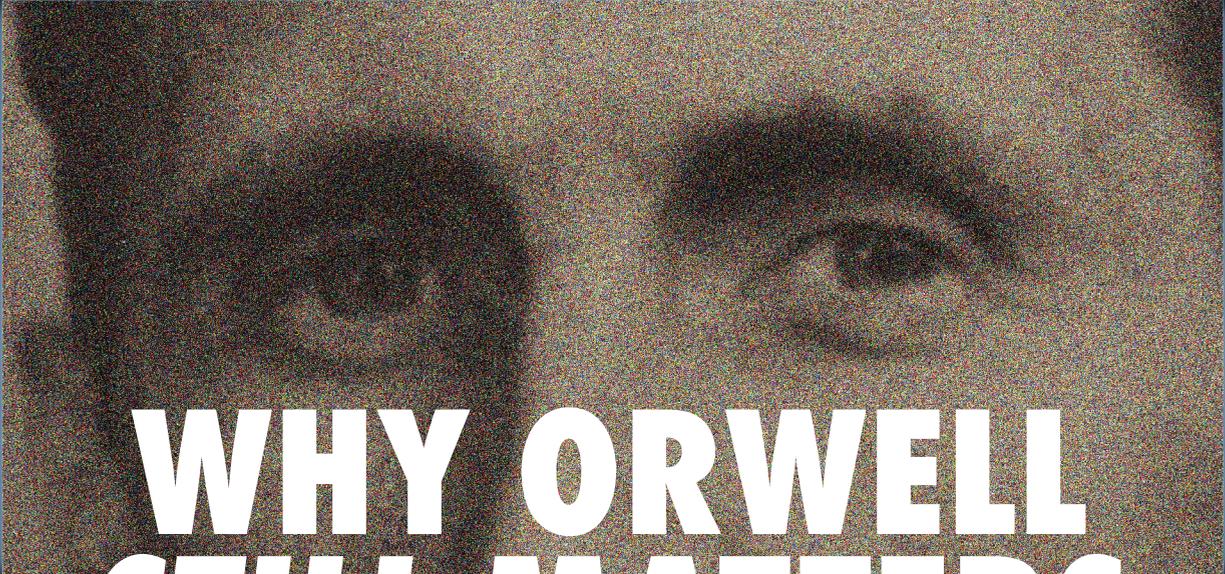


Religion & Liberty

WINTER 2025



WHY ORWELL STILL MATTERS

JOHN RODDEN

Liberty and the
Development of Doctrine

REV. ROBERT A. SIRICO

Alasdair MacIntyre's
Philosophy in Practice

PHILIP D. BUNN

The Holy Scriptures and
America's Presidents

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Revisiting Islamic
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the Last Scapegoat

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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION
Wawrzyniec Grzymała Gościński:
Forerunner of Classical Liberalism

DAVID MENDOZA

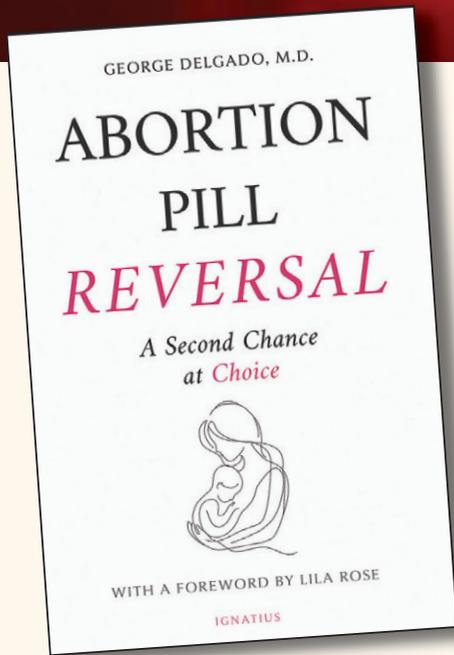
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THE ISSUE THIS TIME

BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

Thomas Carlyle, essayist and historian, a.k.a. the “Sage of Chelsea,” is perhaps best remembered for insisting that “the history of the world is but that of great men.” In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, he examined a choice sampling of those he determined to be “great” examples: Dante, Luther, Shakespeare, Muhammad, Ben Jonson, Oliver Cromwell, and Odin. (No one said you had to be flesh and blood to spin the gears of history.)

The “great man theory” of history has fallen on hard times, however. Egalitarianism, collectivism, and the fight against “white supremacy” have kicked it to the curb. As it turns out, the mystics, artists, entrepreneurs, inventors, and intrepid explorers who were once celebrated as “one-offs” were but lucky byproducts of their social environment if not outright menaces, making those with feebler gifts feel bad about themselves. At the very least, they were enabled by the many “invisible men” (and women) who were of the wrong rank, class, race, or sex to win history’s plaudits. But are some social environments more creative and more likely to produce “great men” than others? The answer you receive will undoubtedly reflect the politics of the person you ask.

The “greatness” of, say, a George Orwell will be assessed differently from that of a St. Paul or an Isaac Newton or a Napoleon (who taught us all not to invade Russia in June or Mexico in January). An atheist, a socialist, a journalist, and a chain-smoker, Orwell (born Eric Blair) spent his professional life fighting, literally and rhetorically, for his vision of a just political system, even when it meant smashing the idols of his fellow leftists. His name is invoked frequently these days, usually as a modifier and as a result of the influence of his masterwork, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as in an “Orwellian” perversion of language, an “Orwellian” misrepresentation of the past to exonerate “the Party,” etc. His body of work can be summed up in one of his own apothegms: “To see what is in front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.”

He was not alone in helping us see what’s right in front of our noses such that we come to understand more profoundly what we thought we already knew. St. John Henry Newman read historical theology so we didn’t have to. As a result, he proposed a way of understanding the discrepancies between the medieval church and that found in, say, the book of Acts and the Didache. *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* proposed a theory of one kind of evolution 14 years before *The Origin of Species*. Within its pages, Newman sought to distinguish healthy growth of the acorn that was the original deposit of truth—the apostolic tradition in oral and written forms—and heretical deviations.

It might be said that the hard work of recovering tradition, that thing to be “handed down” but often lost in transmission, may be one way to interpret Alasdair MacIntyre, who wishes us to understand “our contemporary selves and our contemporary moral relationships.” Tradition “enables us to overcome the constraints on such self-knowledge that modernity, especially advanced modernity, imposes.” MacIntyre stands on the shoulders of giants to shine a light on what we’ve *perhaps* misunderstood or been too eager to dismiss as mere nostalgia.

And if there’s one very bad habit that our current moment has enshrined as a virtual survival mechanism it’s the evil of scapegoating. René Girard to the rescue, helping us to see how “when we scapegoat, we blame others for our problems, yet there is always a nagging doubt. The Resurrection makes profound this skepticism about our own goodness and the guilt of the other.” Great ideas need unpacking again and again by great minds for every generation.

I hope this issue of *Religion & Liberty* will inspire you to pursue greatness in your various vocations and reject the perverse call to mediocrity.

Religion & Liberty

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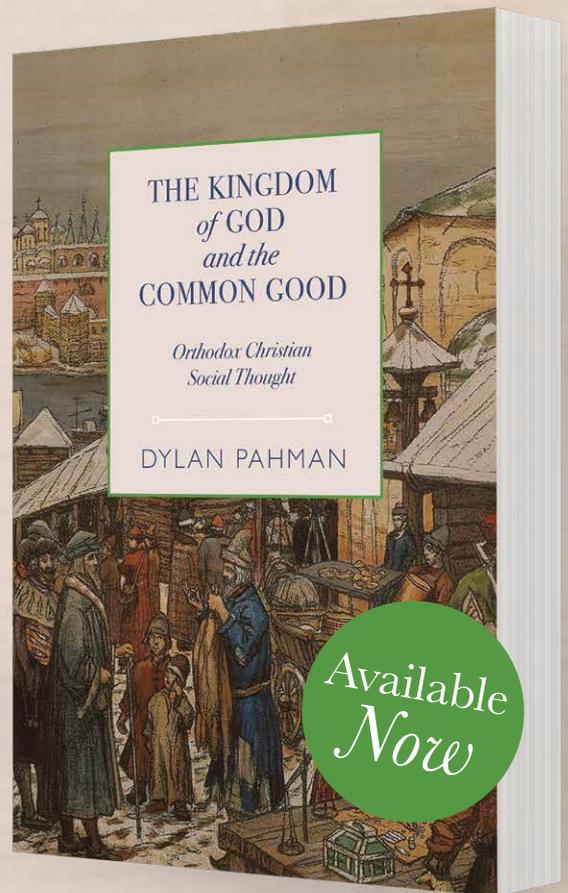


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brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

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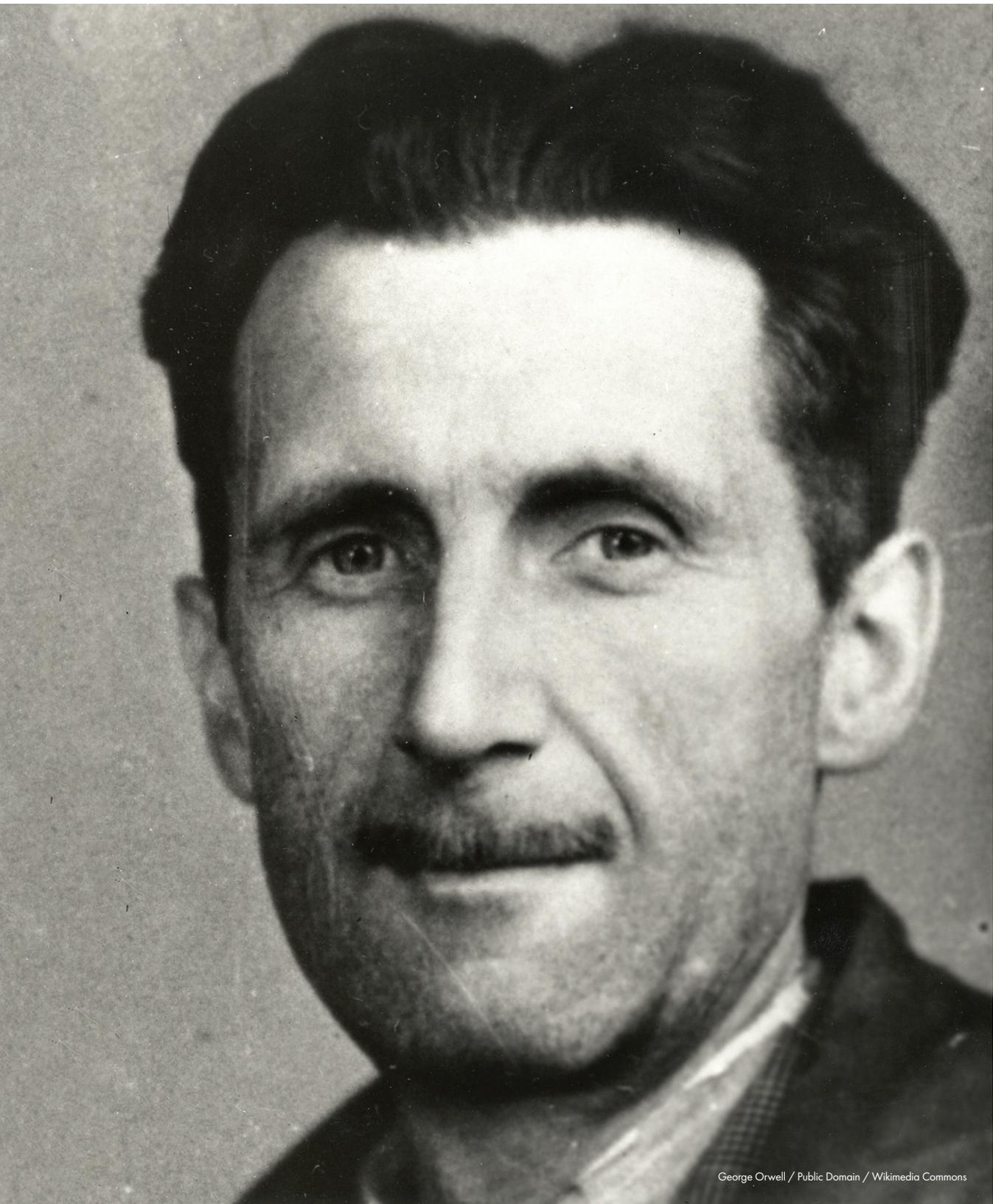
—Rachel Ferguson

Director of the Free Enterprise Center at Concordia University Chicago

WHY ORWELL STILL MATTERS

by JOHN RODDEN

The Hundred Years' War between George Orwell and his intellectual enemies continues unabated. Dismissed by another generation as a "dead metaphor," Orwell's name and work are occasions for fracas and feuding—and an endless succession of quotes.



T

THE CULTURE WAR between George Orwell and the left is soon to enter its tenth decade, and the newest salvo has just been launched. In a *Financial Times* (*FT*) article entitled “How George Orwell Became a Dead Metaphor,” Naoise Dolan bemoans the legions of “Orwell fans” who overpraise Orwell and reduce him to a “dead metaphor” like those he disparaged in “Politics and the English Language.” Of course, Orwell is not innocent here, Dolan adds, but has invited the recurrent waves of “Orwellmania” since his death.

The sharp shift in focus—from Orwell’s purported sins to the alleged hollow-drum sycophancy of his



George Orwell (1903–1950)

readers—may be new. But the language of derision and dismissal from the left is tiresomely familiar.

The animus, which was mutual, has now endured decades since Orwell has gone to the grave. Yes, Orwell came increasingly to hate the left during his lifetime. In turn, the left—from the top down, starting with the chairman of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Harry Pollitt—has long hated him. This history of the fast-approaching “Hundred Years’ War” between Orwell and the Marxist left possesses seven stages, three of them posthumous. The *FT* article by Dolan represents the opening round of the emergent seventh phase. Its new angle of assault focuses more on “Orwell’s fans”—exempting the members of the Orwell Society, may we hope?—than on Orwell himself.

Each phase during Orwell’s lifetime of this never-ending siege was closely associated with a major landmark in Orwell’s publishing and reception history; in his afterlife, the landmarks of the fifth and sixth stages were mainly linked not to what Orwell said but rather what other writers—fans or foes—said about him. This panoramic historiography encompasses far more than the Two-Minute Hate of a few ephemeral, if belligerent, exchanges. Nor even an extended Hate Week confined to an intemperate spat about a book or two, or about a position on a historical event (say, the Spanish Civil War or World War II), eventually

blowing over and forgotten. Instead, from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, the anti-romance of “Orwell and the left” became a “Hate Decade”—and it winds its way through new minefields into our own time, well on its way to becoming a full century of hate.

It warrants emphasis that the collocation “Orwell and the left” refers specifically to the Stalinist left of Orwell’s day, and since that time to the Marxist left and some feminist radicals. This is the so-called far left, near synonymous in Orwell’s lifetime with Soviet communism in general and the CPGB in particular. The distinction between “left” and “Marxist/Stalinist left” should be underlined, for the vast majority of left-of-center readers have found Orwell’s work valuable and compelling, however flawed or limited they nevertheless judged it. Rather, it is the ideologically committed “far left” whose vituperations against Orwell are the stuff of the never-ending Hate Week.

As John Rossi wrote 40 years ago, “In itself this would seem something of a paradox, for after all, Orwell was a committed socialist, a one-time member of the radical Independent Labor Party, and a supporter of the post-war Labour government”—and, I might add, a personal acquaintance and former close colleague of one of its most influential and politically radical cabinet members, Aneurin Bevan.

Yet none of that has really mattered to the Marxist and feminist left. Although most mainstream socialists and other radicals outside the Stalinist orbit welcomed Orwell no later than the late 1940s, with the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1949 and Orwell’s death seven months later, the Stalinist left never did. First under the sway of the Popular Front in the 1930s and then the CPGB during World War II and for a time thereafter, the left has rejected him as *the* major cultural threat challenging their contention

that the “Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics” was not a cruel misnomer, indeed that it was anything but state capitalism—or rather “oligarchical collectivism.” And, of course, a threat to their increasingly suspect claims that they themselves represented “English socialism”—and not *Ingsoc*.

Let us briefly review this history, devoting most attention to a recent example of the latest and seventh stage of invective.

1 OF NAME-CALLING AND NOSE-TWEAKING: THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER (1937)

Orwell’s breakup with the Stalinist left began, one could say, before they had ever even dated. Orwell had never been a member of the CPGB, had never been a communist in any sense—and so was not a “renegade” and had no remorse about lacerating and lampooning English socialists. The hate fest began with the publication of *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937, following his two-month research trip to the Midlands, and some of Orwell’s best salvos and funniest barbs are to be found there. Harry Pollitt of the CPGB reviewed the book himself in *The Daily Worker*, accusing Orwell of “slumming” and bourgeois “snobbery,” while also suggesting that it was Orwell’s own belief that “the working classes smell.” To Pollitt and others, Orwell himself was the *Diabolus*. As the author of *Wigan Pier* had half-anticipated, lost in all the cheek-pinching and defensive retorts was the

Harry Pollitt of the CPGB delivers a speech in 1941



“
ORWELL’S BREAKUP WITH THE STALINIST LEFT BEGAN, ONE COULD SAY, BEFORE THEY HAD EVER EVEN DATED.
”



POUM demonstration in Spain in 1936

simple fact that he himself was a (rather cranky) socialist advocate who was poking fun *at his own side*.

From this “high point” in Orwell’s relationship with the British left, relations spiraled steadily downhill, and the next three stages went beyond name-calling and standoffish interaction to unconcealed contempt.

2 SPAIN AND THE COMMUNISTS’ “BETRAYAL OF THE LEFT”: HOMAGE TO CATALONIA (1938)

Orwell left for Spain four months before *Wigan Pier*’s publication, determined to fight at the front. He wound up in Catalonia, having signed on with a mixed anarchist-Trotskyist militia, known as the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*—United Marxist Workers’ Party). His second phase of relations with the left emerged from his seven months in Spain. His experience there intensified his animus and expanded its range far beyond the British left to “the stupid cult of Russia” and Stalin’s machinations throughout Europe and the world—and specifically Stalin’s intention, despite all the pious rhetoric about a united Popular Front of leftists against fascism—to eliminate all non-Stalinist representatives of socialism, including Orwell himself and many of his POUM comrades. Orwell’s anguish over the lost war, his dear comrades, and the POUM’s ruthless suppression by its putative allies (the Soviet advisers and the Spanish Communist Party) received full expression in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), his elegiac memoir that reflected Orwell’s upsurge in bitterness

and belligerence toward British Stalinists as well as his broader targets. Soviet NKVD files available after the USSR’s dissolution in December 1991 establish that the Russian secret police spied on him in Spain and may have targeted him for elimination.

3 OF PATRIOTISM AND PIG RULE: ANIMAL FARM (1945)

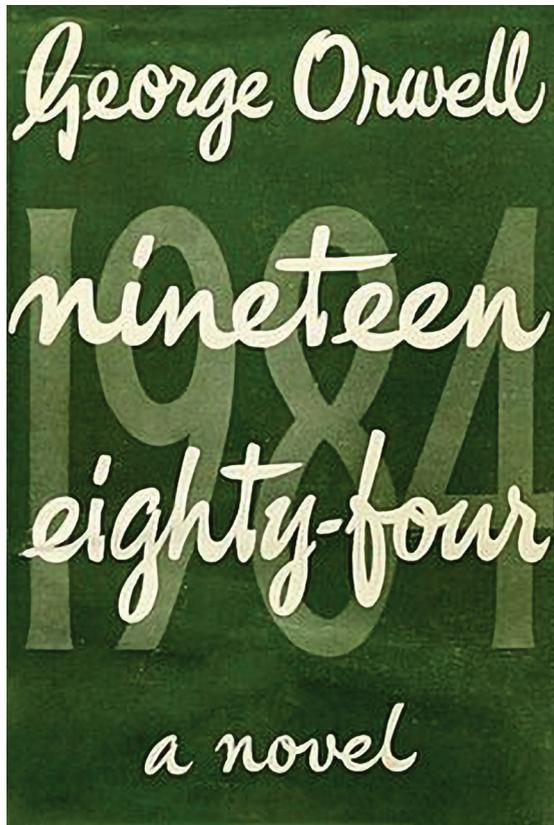
Orwell’s abhorrence of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist left in England incubated during the next several years, confirmed by the August 1939 signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Meanwhile *The New Statesman* and other Stalinist organs were busy condemning Orwell in no uncertain terms. Orwell’s loathing for the USSR did not substantially change despite the wartime alliance that followed in the wake of Hitler’s double-cross of Stalin and invasion of the USSR in June 1941. Wartime ally or not, Russia was a brutal tyranny, and Stalin nothing less than “a disgusting murderer.”

By wartime’s close, a third stage of relations—which represented a far bigger downward step than ever before—was at hand. The process of antagonism that had commenced with *Wigan Pier*, and which had dramatically expanded beyond the English scene during the Spanish Civil War and *Homage to Catalonia*’s appearance, now reached a new intensity. “I consider the willingness to criticize Russia and Stalin as the test of intellectual honesty,” he told John Middleton Murry in August 1944. In *Animal Farm*, which was accumulating rejection after rejection that summer and fall, he put himself to the test—and passed with flying colors.

The headlines alone from communist publications during the next four years tell the story of Orwell’s official standing in CPGB circles: “The Nightmare Mr. Orwell,” “Prisoner of Hatred,” and—my own personal favorite—“Maggot of the Month.”

4 FACE-OFF ON THE WORLD STAGE: NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR (1949)

Although Orwell was sick during much of 1947–48, he felt driven to complete the writing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which marked the confrontational high point between the left and the author whom *Pravda* would soon headline an “Enemy of Mankind.” With *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s publication in June 1949, both Orwell’s strategic range and satirical renown widened still further. He soon passed from being the



left's most visible and most effective foe in Britain to being the leading cultural Cold Warrior in the postwar West. Henceforth the showdown between "Orwell and the left" would play out on the world stage, having fully intertwined with the higher-order Cold War dynamics of America vs. Russia, capitalism vs. communism, the so-called "Free" World" vs. "the Iron Curtain." The novel's catchwords and Newspeak idiom would soon be inextricably bound up in the agitprop between East and West, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* itself would become the most famous work of Cold War literature ever published.

By the time of Orwell's death in January 1950, the CPGB and the left had adopted a strategy that has persisted to this day: a mix of literary derogation, political diatribe, and psychoanalytic autopsy (of Orwell's "sick," "counter-revolutionary" mind).

5 THE BBC ADAPTATION OF NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR (1954)

BBC teleplay productions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were broadcast (twice) in mid-December 1954 and proved the decisive rocket boost that catapulted

“
**NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR
WOULD BECOME THE
MOST FAMOUS WORK OF
COLD WAR LITERATURE
EVER PUBLISHED.**
”

both Orwell and his novel into the starry heavens of still-enduring canonical enshrinement and international fame. "The 'Orwellian' Night of December 12," as I once titled a recounting of the extraordinary and still little-acknowledged impact of those incredible two hours (8:35 p.m. to 10:35 p.m.) that Sunday evening, is the identifiable date when "Orwell" and his proper adjective achieved public fame.

For the size of the audience—which one scholar claims was the largest ever except for Queen Elizabeth II's coronation the previous year—shot his novel into the realm of supersellerdom (from 150 to 19,000 copies per week within days) and soon established his catchwords as fixtures in the international political lexicon and cultural imagination. The effect was meteoric: By the time the second broadcast had ended, on Thursday night, December 16, the language and vision of Orwell's novel had gone "viral." "The term 'Big Brother,' which the day before yesterday meant nothing to 99 percent of the population," editorialized *The Times* of London days later, "has become a household phrase."

Coinciding within days of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's ignominious fall from power after his official censure by the Senate in December 1954, the BBC-TV broadcast marks the fifth moment in the pugnacious 70-year history of Orwell vs. the left. In 1955, Isaac Deutscher's "reply" to the posthumous Orwell—which of course was not to Orwell or his novel but to the BBC teleplays—turned Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into an atomic culture bomb, a veritable thermonuclear threat against humankind. Wallowing in "boundless despair," Orwell unleashed on the world "an ideological superweapon" that portended the numerical nightmare of 1-9-8-4.

6 THE ANTI-ORWELL INTELLECTUAL BRIGADE ON PARADE (1960–2024)

Beginning with E.P. Thompson’s essay “Outside the Whale” in 1960, a New Left critique emerged: Orwell the detached, cynical inner émigré. Decrying the conservative political climate in Britain throughout much of the 1950s, Thompson blamed it on Orwell, making the preposterous claim that a single essay, “Inside the Whale” (1940), had “led an entire generation” to embrace a posture of despair about the possibility of social change. According to Thompson, Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also made fashionable a generation’s stance of resigned acceptance of totalitarianism and a refusal of political commitment. Thompson treated some admiring comments Orwell made about Henry Miller in “Inside the Whale”—where he defended Miller’s choice to stand as an observer rather than become an activist—as Orwell’s ruling, lifelong beliefs, thereby ignoring the fact that they were written during a brief, prewar phase of his thinking as a pacifist.

A legion of other similarly minded critics and intellectuals hostile to Orwell followed as the 1960s and ’70s unfolded, among them Raymond Williams and Edward Said. Throughout the Cold War and into the present century, Orwell’s leftist critics have had nothing comparable to Orwell’s writings to wield, either in English or any other language, as we have noted. Bereft of any works of the imagination even remotely equal to *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, communist dialecticians have been reduced to the desperate measure of flinging Orwell’s own

Raymond Williams (1921–1988)



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coinages back at him and his supporters—as well as trying to hang them on numerous Western leaders and agencies—for example, “Big Brother Reagan,” “Big Sister Thatcher,” the “Hoover Thought Police,” “the Orwellian language” of “liberal bourgeois Newspeak,” and on and on. Such phrases resounded in screaming headlines in the state-controlled Party newspapers of Eastern Europe and the USSR—even as Orwell’s books were officially proscribed and unavailable in either libraries or bookstores, all of it further illustrating the ironies of impotence. Yes, George Orwell had gone down the memory hole in the communist world—yet millions of citizens recognized both his neologisms and even his name in adjectival form.

7 “HERO” ORWELL: “THE DEAD METAPHOR” AND “HIS GROUPIES” (2024–)

As I remarked at the outset, having exhausted their energies by fruitless direct assaults on Orwell, the most recent strategy is to open fire on the amorphous, unnamed “Orwell crowd.” Naoise Dolan’s critique of Orwell in *FT* clues us in as to the current thinking of the youngest generation of what I term “the new new left.” Titled “How George Orwell Became a Dead Metaphor,” Dolan has a ready answer: It is thanks to “the Orwell fans” who “want their hero to step in and put things right,” “evok[ing] the great man’s foresight about the dangers of an overweening nanny state, a censorious far-left or whatever else may be

“

THROUGHOUT THE COLD WAR AND INTO THE 21ST CENTURY, THE FAR LEFT HAS HAD NOTHING COMPARABLE TO ORWELL’S WRITINGS TO WIELD.

”

getting your goat that day,” ranging from Israel and Palestine to cancel culture and Ukraine.

As it turns out, however, apart from targeting the “acolytes,” the newest stage is not so new. Dolan is simply channeling Thompson through the work of Edward Said—whether or not she is aware of the fact. “Above all, his fans,” says Dolan of Orwell, “admire the idea that it might be possible to take a courageous stance precisely by refusing to take a side at all.” Notably, “most of Orwell’s acolytes are English”—which presumably accounts for their irresistible attraction to Orwell’s clever construction of a “nexus between Englishness, rational thinking and truth.” Quoted at length by Dolan is Edward Said’s attempted takedown of Orwell in 1980, “Tourism Among the Dogs,” in *The New Statesman*, where he echoed and updated Thompson, arguing that “a new generation” was equally mesmerized by Orwell. It, too, lamented Said, was seduced into Orwell’s “mendaciously” “stakeless bystanderism” and Orwell’s lionizing of “Englishness” and “fair play.” These are all attitudes or values championed by right-wingers who “identify with Orwell in part because he invites them to.” We can blame Orwell, therefore, for his admirers.

Dolan agrees that today’s “Orwell fans” and “groupies” have acted on his invitation, though she largely keeps her guns aimed on them and their groupthink, not him. As a vocal advocate for queer-ness, LGBTQ+ rights, and inclusivity, she speaks for a new leftist generation that abhors homophobia, ableist language, and societal ignorance about autism. (Orwell’s own alleged homophobia goes unmentioned.) She also inveighs against Orwell’s “naïve” allegiance to “spartan language”—as if it “could unmask stupidity.”

Ironically, or perhaps predictably, the one name that is mentioned among the “groupies” is a (conveniently dead) writer who has long been a whipping boy for the bien-pensant left: Christopher Hitchens. Her ultimate aim turns out to be the unmasking of the groupies’ stupidity for following this Pied Piper. His “unfettered appreciation,” indeed “veneration,” of Orwell turns out to be the wellspring of “the Orwell mania.” The ritualistic quoting all began, Dolan naively maintains, with *Why Orwell Matters* (2002). Alas! However serviceable it would be to blame the left’s most recent bête noire, Hitchens, such quoting began more than a half-century earlier, as I have documented in a half-dozen studies of Orwell’s reputation. Nonetheless, Dolan proceeds: “Hagiographies like the one Hitchens wrote” are the secret source of



Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011)

what has resulted in “Orwell” becoming a “dead metaphor.” We are supposed to imagine that Hitchens’s purported overpraise has paved the way for the raves of today’s nameless “Orwell groupies,” for whom “it might not be too much to say that Orwell invented the bra and engineered the fall of the Berlin Wall.” Stefan Collini, a veiled Orwell hater who recently dismissed my own work, branded Hitchens as Orwell’s reactionary heir, whose similar plain-man persona spewed “no bulls--t’ bulls--t.”

In the end, therefore, Naoise Dolan has distilled the Orwell “crowd” to Hitchens. Orwell “the dead metaphor” apparently doesn’t matter—precisely because Hitchens still does. A pernicious influence on the “Orwell groupies,” Hitchens has been “the worst sort of wingman”—or better: (right-)wingman. Their “mania” was ignited by *his* mania.

Writing in 1971, the Welsh socialist author Raymond Williams smugly prophesied that Orwell’s “influence” on the radical left was “diminishing” and would continue to decline. Williams’s forecast about the left’s lessening “engagement” with Orwell has proved false, however, as the assault on the author has not just proceeded into our century but even intensified. But why?



A sign outside a fitting room in a shop in Memphis, Tennessee (2017)

Granted, Orwell is big game. He is, in fact, the very biggest, one of the most important social commentators who has ever lived if measured in terms of the effluence of his influence. No other writer is so endlessly cited and quoted to buttress an argument or establish intellectual pedigree. After all, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the most influential (and bestselling) political work of all time: No other book has ever risen five (!) times to No. 1 on the international best-seller lists—a feat it performed as recently as 2017, 68 years after its original date of publication.

Given its arsenal of battle-certified coinages, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has provided an arsenal of satirical salvos during political controversies and culture wars for more than seven decades. For instance, a stage adaptation of the novel was performed on Broadway in 2022, intended as a biting critique of the first Trump administration. Meanwhile, numerous voices on the right have viewed speech codes, cancel culture, mandatory adoption of preferred pronouns, and left-inspired infringements on personal liberties as eerily resembling Orwellian forms of creeping totalitarianism.

Yet, as Williams also acknowledged, Orwell still stands as “an enormous statue warning you to go back.” Hence the need to destroy the reputation of a political writer of world stature, the only one who commands respect across the entire span of the ideological spectrum, from right to left—with the sole

exception, that is, of the far left. To “take him down”—as the Marxist and feminist left have long sought—is to remove the roadblock to their perceived advance. It remains, therefore, a prime directive.

Moreover, throughout the Cold War and into the 21st century, the far left has had nothing comparable to Orwell’s writings to wield, in English or any other language. Bereft of any works of the creative spirit even remotely equal to *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Marxist dialecticians have been reduced to the desperate measure of vilifying his admirers and ironically flinging Orwell’s own coinages back at him and his supporters. Conor Cruise O’Brien—another left-wing detractor—spoke the truth when he compared Orwell’s chastening impact on Marxist intellectuals with that of Voltaire’s on the 18th-century French nobility: “He weakened their belief in their own ideology, made them ashamed of their clichés, left them intellectually more scrupulous and defenceless.”

May his chastening impact continue to prevail. **RL**

John Rodden has taught at the University of Virginia and the University of Texas at Austin. His books include The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell, The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of “St. George” Orwell, and Becoming George Orwell.



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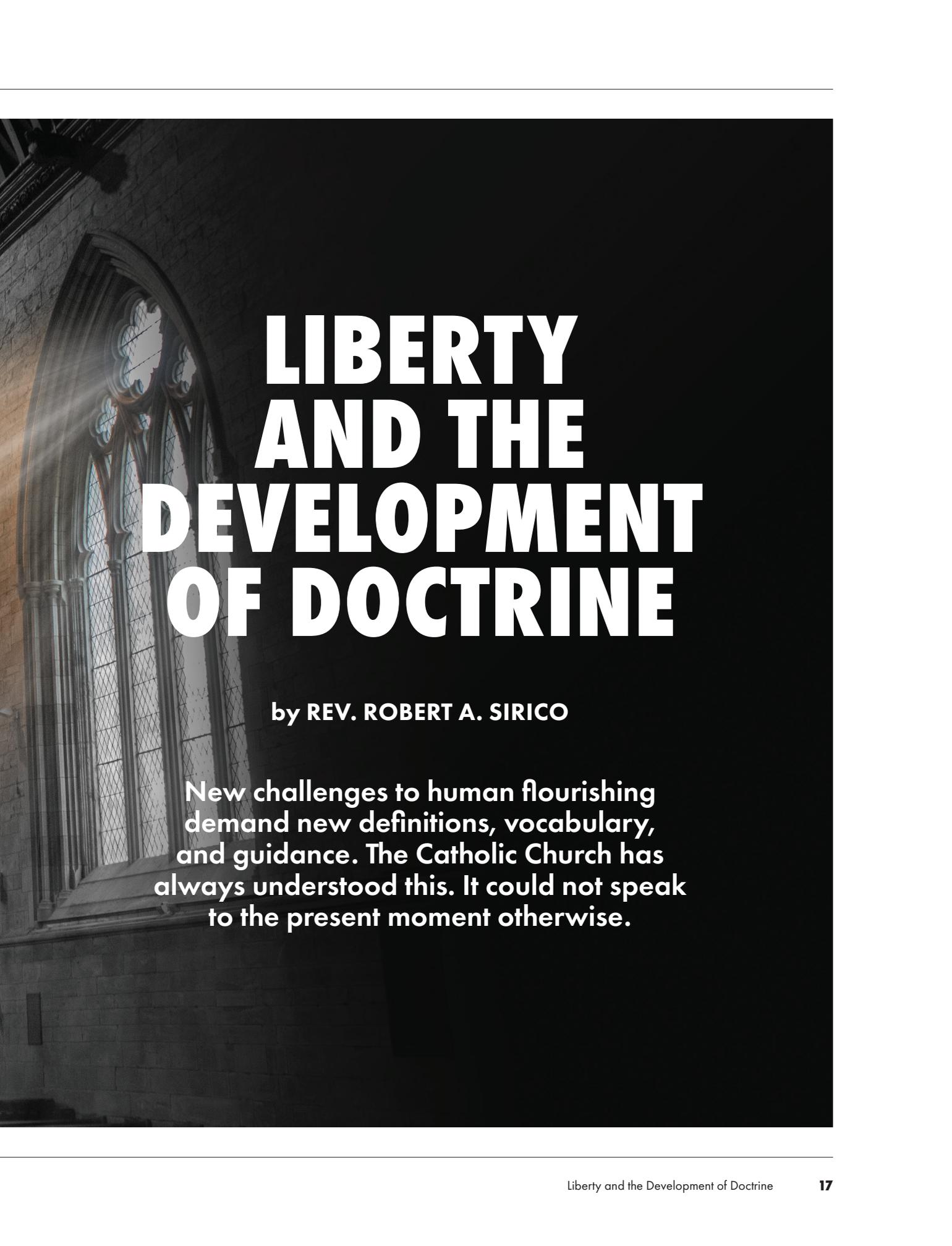


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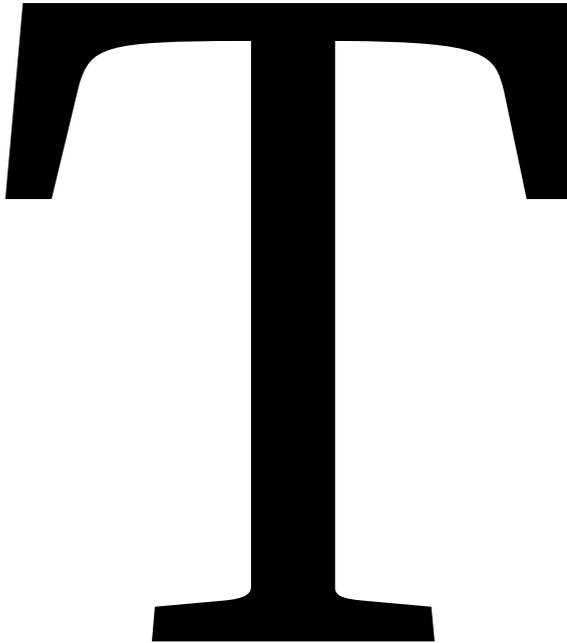


LIBERTY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

by **REV. ROBERT A. SIRICO**

New challenges to human flourishing demand new definitions, vocabulary, and guidance. The Catholic Church has always understood this. It could not speak to the present moment otherwise.

hold in Europe, confessional differences led to the suppression and persecution of Christians by Christians.... A half century of bloody conflict, the so-called wars of religion, was set in motion. But by the middle of the seventeenth century men with great wisdom and less religious fervor came on the scene, and the fanaticism of religious believers gave way to the cool reason of the philosophers. Armed with notions of the superiority of reason over faith, skeptical of received truth, and distrustful of religious claims and institutions, these enlightened thinkers forged a new set of ideas about toleration and religious freedom. Through their efforts the modern idea of liberty of conscience was born.



THE STORY IS most often told that religion is that force of coercion that attempts to bend the mind to its own perception of truth and resists, by its very nature, any institutional and most especially legal attempts to ensure the right of people to seek truth on their own.

In his recent book *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Liberty*, Robert Louis Wilken sums up this portrayal of history in this way:

Religious freedom is often thought to be the work of the Enlightenment. In the sixteenth century, so the story goes, when the Reformation took

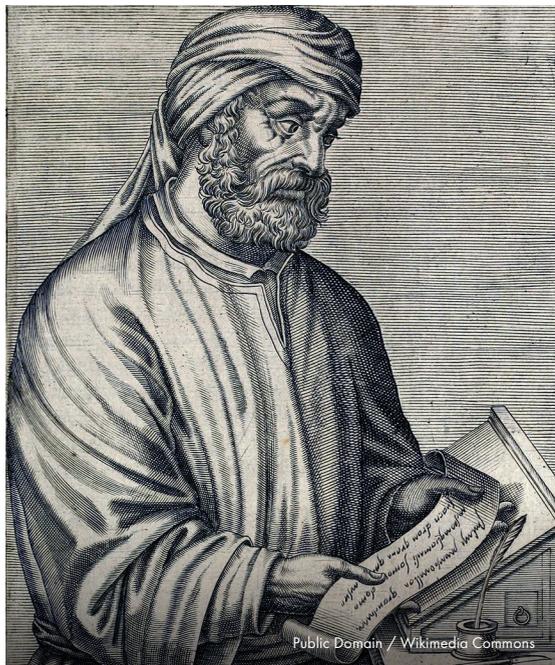
The remainder of Wilken's work is an exploration and repudiation of that simplistic thesis. Wilken brings together an illuminating history of Christian thinkers and how their reflections developed over the ages. He suggests that significant writers within the first centuries of the Church, while not developing a full, systematic, and mature doctrine of religious liberty and tolerance, nonetheless drew on the knowledge of classical philosophy, Scripture, and the experience of Christians at the hands of the Roman state—a state that, after all, had executed their founder—to formulate arguments against their persecutors.

To see the complexity of the historical breadth of Christian debate over the distinctions between the state's coercive power and the equally compelling yet persuasive authority of the Church, we can look at what is arguably the foundational text that sets up this debate over religious liberty, the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:21: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

Throughout the ages, even once Christians had emerged from being a persecuted minority to becoming, at times, a persecuting establishment, these words of Christ were never forgotten, and often grappled with in vastly different ways.

For example, we find in the third century a theologian from Carthage, Tertullian, sounding almost modern, credited with first employing the phrase "religious liberty" in his argument for tolerance:

See that you do not end up fostering irreligion by taking away freedom of religion [*libertas religionis*] and forbid free choice with respect to divine



Tertullian (c. 155–c. 220)

matters, so that I am not allowed to worship what I wish, but am forced to worship what I do not wish. Not even a human being would like to be honored unwillingly. (Wilken, p. 11)

He further pleads,

It is only just and a privilege *inherent in human nature* that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions; the religious practice of one person neither harms nor helps another. It is not part of religion to coerce religious practice, for it is only by choice not coercion that we should be led to religion. (*Italics added*)

In the next century, the noted Latinist Lactantius would likewise articulate his defense for tolerance, saying, “Let words be used rather than blows, that the decision may be free.”

Tertullian’s and Lactantius’s are only the beginning of an extended argument through almost two millennia of Christian thought about religious freedom and the state. Over the centuries, thinkers would come at the question from differing vantage points, ranging from Augustine and Aquinas to Calvin, Luther, and others. Such reasoning was retrieved and deployed at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was also in this



Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. / CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

A denarius featuring Caesar Augustus Tiberius

period that Erasmus cites Jerome’s and Chrysostom’s commentaries on the wheat and the tares to say that Christ forbade the execution of heretics.

This and similar ideas expressed at different points throughout the Church’s history provide a rich backdrop for reflection on the development of the idea of religious liberty within the framework of the Church’s tradition.

Development of doctrine, as St. Vincent of Lérins and St. John Henry Newman help us to understand, is to be expected as part of the Church’s role in teasing out from the seeds of the deposit of the Faith the implications of what was first entrusted to the Apostles.

It might be said that Newman wrote his way into the Catholic Church in penning his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), wherein he outlines the dynamic nature of the Church’s own probing of her beliefs from the implicit to the explicit, delineating the numerous stages and qualifications required. In an introductory essay for *Development*, the late Fr. Stanley Jaki noted that for Newman “there is no suspended animation” in doctrine. While consistency and continuity are constitutive components of her teaching, there emerges, under the pressure of innumerable contingencies, deeper implications and articulations of the Faith that might not have been as manifest or defined in one setting as they might come to be in another.

The very compilation of the canon of the New Testament took a three-centuries-long process of

sifting through various letters of St. Paul, the memoirs of the Apostles, and a host of materials in circulation in the first centuries, this in order to distinguish the authentic texts from pious works and doctrinally heterodox ones. The most significant instance of the development of Christian doctrine was a deepening understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ himself.

There is no need here to go into the nuances of the argumentation between the *homoousios* versus the *homoiousios* clauses. We need only note that the process of development allowed the Church to confront questions that arose regarding her relationship to Christ only once the precision of Greek and Latin grammar, vocabulary, and categories, for example, were brought to bear on such questions.

Even if not as primary to Christian theology as its understanding of the Godhead, the matter of the Christian life lived out in the world gives rise to considerations of conscience, tolerance, and liberty and can be seen in nascent form in the Scriptures and those thinkers alluded to previously. There we detect a seed in need of cultivation and development.

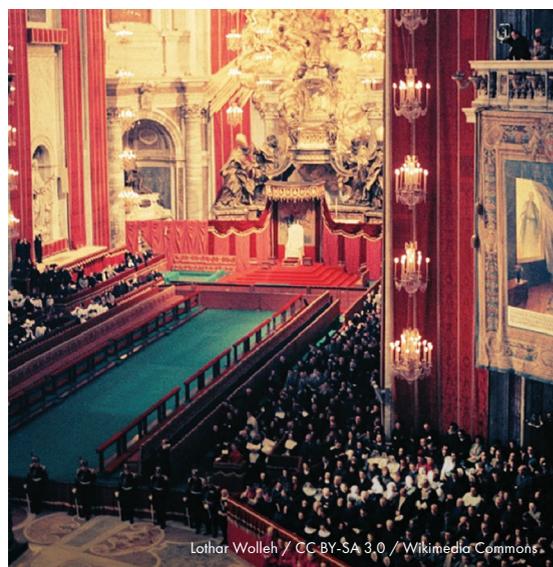
The process of unfolding these nascent ideas yields still more questions, such as the relationship of conscience to the integrity and protection of truth. The role of reason in coming to an apprehension of truth and the necessity of freedom for the proper exercise of that reason must be considered. Then there is the critical question of whether authentic faith can be coerced.

In terms of the Catholic magisterium, a significant culmination and development of these ideas emerged at the Second Vatican Council. Much of the public debate subsequent to the council related to the liturgical life and practice of the Church, as well as to the moral, specifically sexual norms governing the life of the faithful. Yet even today, *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) provokes significant discussion inside and outside the Church given its argument pertaining to the right of personal religious freedom and the role of the government in relation to that freedom.

The political and historical context in which the Church has to function informs our understanding of the refinement of her teaching. These contexts range from extreme and hostile secularism to atheism, communism, and socialism, materialism and National Socialism. Each context raises new reference points requiring reformulated arguments, vocabulary, and the appropriation of new discoveries or insights in order to re-present the perennial content of the Faith. What might have been an adequate and effective reply under one set of circumstances in a particular historical moment or a particular place might prove incomplete or inadequate in another.

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ, a prominent American ecclesiologist, did a more than adequate job in outlining the theological reasons why DH may rightly be seen as an authentic development of the Church's teaching in matters of conscience and the proper limits to state power. His argument prescinds

Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)



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THE IDEA OF INTEGRALISM IS ESSENTIALLY WHAT STOOD IN THE WAY OF THE CHURCH'S DEVELOPMENT OF ITS UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

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from a parallel argument over whether previous Church teaching on the matter of religious liberty was indeed infallible teaching or only *doctrina catholica*, i.e., nondefinitive, nonbinding teaching.

In acknowledging the importance of the question, Dulles's argument points to the intention of the Council Fathers in drafting *DH* as well as that expressed within the document itself, which is to maintain the continuity between the prior teaching of the popes in relation to religious freedom, both personal (i.e., in relation to conscience) and social (having to do with the role of the state). Indeed, Pope St. John XXIII said as much in his inaugural address opening the proceedings: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”

The importance of the debate, Dulles underscores, relates not only to the objection advanced by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the “conservative” opposition to *DH* that the document breaks continuity with previous popes, specifically those of the mid-19th century, but also to the more “progressive” elements who saw in the development of the prior teaching by a council of the Church an opportunity for the Church to repudiate settled moral doctrines such as artificial contraception.

Building on Newman, Dulles shows that while matters of a social or political character do “not follow exactly the same course of development as pure dogma” due to their need to take into account different social contingencies, their “fundamental principles are constant.”

Dulles sees *DH* as seeking to develop the Church's teaching in light of the changed social, political, and ecumenical reality of the Church in the mid-20th century, which found the Faith under a different series of threats than those in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the later context, the Church was threatened by various militant secular liberal movements, whereas in the earlier she found herself confronting varieties of socialist, fascist, and communist governments.

Dulles also sees a theological shift from the neo-Scholastic focus on ontology to a more personalist approach emphasizing human dignity and freedom under the influence of Archbishop Karol Wojtyła and others. This, Dulles says, places *DH* in the broader “framework of a comprehensive theory of human freedom based on classical theology and contemporary personalist insights.”

Throughout history, one notes a recurrent response by some religious institutions to the secular world: to create some form of theocratic arrangement, holding to the idea that as God is the one, supreme creator and sustainer of all that is, and is himself the source of all authority, he alone can be the sole ruling authority on earth as well, extending his reign throughout society by means of civic legislation.

Dulles identifies a prescient insight from St. John Paul's pontificate, which augments *DH* in his repudiation of integralism as the Church's preferred option concerning relations between the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. The pope said that “religious integralism, which makes no distinction between the proper spheres of faith and civil life, which is still practiced in other parts of the world, seems to be incompatible with the very spirit of Europe, as it has been shaped by the Christian message” (“Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II Durante la visita al Parlamento Europeo,” October 11, 1988).

The idea of integralism is essentially what stood in the way of the Church's development of its understanding of religious liberty. If the Church holds definitively to a basic amalgamation of the state and her own authority, then religious liberty, in the sense that people should be free to pursue religious truth unburdened by state coercion, is impossible. Integralism's insistence on what effectively amounts to a confessional state fails to grapple with the tensions that a host of Christian thinkers have debated over the centuries. Thus, integralism can end up supporting the persecution, not merely the anathematization, of heretics.



POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II ELABORATES THE TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY TO DEMONSTRATE THE PRIORITY OF NONSTATE ACTION ON BEHALF OF THOSE IN DIFFICULTY.



In their essay “On Integralism, Religious Liberty, and the Authority of the Church: 19th Century Popes and 20th Century Popes Disagreed,” Professors Lawrence King and Robert T. Miller provide us with a range of solid sources on this, including Cyprian, Lactantius, Ambrose, and Aquinas, as well as numerous ecumenical councils and canonical sources to the effect that, in various ways, the Church ought to shun the use of state coercion in proclaiming her message.

Informed by such history, *DH* instead develops church teaching on a free society without leaving the public sphere “naked” of moral or spiritual impulses. Aware of the need for society to have a moral orientation that all can know through natural law, *DH* amplifies the implications of previously established church teaching on human dignity and the insights of Christian anthropology as seen in the idea of the inviolability of conscience that underscores the essential nature of consent to the practice of virtue. In its reiteration of the council’s teaching in *DH*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers this summation:

The right to religious liberty is neither a moral license to adhere to error, nor a supposed right to error, but rather a natural right of the human person to civil liberty, i.e., immunity, within just limits, from external constraint in religious matters by political authorities. This natural right ought to be acknowledged in the juridical order of society in such a way that it constitutes a civil right. (CCC 2108)

Many of the same insights into anthropology, conscience, and the requirement for volition for virtue that allowed for the Church’s development of her understanding of religious liberty might have application as well to economic liberty. Any authentic development of Catholic teaching in this area must presume continuity of teaching with the past, but also involves reflection upon the growing knowledge uncovered by economics and other social sciences. While economics is generally not as closely related to the core of Church teaching on topics such as family and marriage, neither is it radically divorced from moral obligation.

Pope St. John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (CA) offers the most thorough “re-reading” of Catholic social thinking in the aftermath of the collapse of history’s most extensive experiment with socialism: the Soviet Union and socialist systems in Central Europe. One central question John Paul sought to examine was the extent to which the business economy might throw favorable and “practical light on a truth about the person which Christianity has constantly affirmed” (CA, no. 32).

Within this rereading, the pope affirms both the practical and moral legitimacy of profit, entrepreneurship, rational self-interest, productivity, and a stable currency, as well as the importance of the role of private property and its social dimension, while distinguishing consumerism from the business economy. He elaborates the traditional principle of subsidiarity to demonstrate the priority of nonstate action on behalf of those in difficulty. Higher levels of state intervention are justified only in a temporary “substitute function,” and he warns against “bureaucratic ways of thinking,” concluding “that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need” (see CA, nos. 32, 42, 43, 44, and 48).

Centesimus Annus opened a new dialogue on human freedom and its implications, and in this sense stands

Pope John Paul II statue at Jasna Góra Monastery in Poland



Hilda Weges / Adobe Stock

beside *Dignitatis Humanae* as representative of the Church's developing insights and practical moral implications of liberty.

The present historical moment confronts us with a profound and ominous confusion related to such fundamental matters as the very definition of human life and person, sexuality, and identity. From that incomprehension, and derived from it, there emerges additional and complex confusion surrounding man's role in the care of creation. This inevitability entails questions of human freedom and intelligence as it relates to a rightly formed conscience as well as to the role of freedom in the endeavor to make use of natural resources for the common good and the material betterment of mankind.

The Church has the experience of two millennia to bring to bear upon the historically unprecedented rise out of poverty of so many millions over the past two centuries. The causes of this prosperity are many and interrelated. A deepened understanding of that prosperity is indispensable to human liberty and the extension of that liberty to the expanded capacity of people to exchange goods and services—and because of that, knowledge—on a global scale.

It would be a failure of epic proportions were the Church not to live up to her responsibility here. Throughout human history, the fundamental economic question people have had to confront has been how to organize their use of scarce resources for human survival. Today a new question arises that necessitates our confrontation not with scarcity but with abundance. How to live lives worthy of human dignity amid such prosperity is a question the Church is well-suited to help us confront, but only if she continues to develop her insights in the areas pondered in this presentation. **RI.**

(This essay has been adapted from a speech delivered at the Newman and Controversies in Catholicism conference, held in Rome on December 5, 2019, and sponsored by the Acton Institute.)

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is president emeritus and the co-founder of the Acton Institute. His writings on religious, political, economic, and social matters are published in a variety of journals, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *the London Financial Times*.

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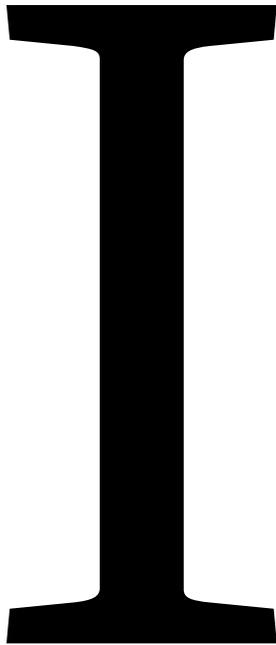
ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

by **PHILIP D. BUNN**

**Friend or foe of liberalism?
Conservatism? The intellectual
trajectory of this influential
thinker has left many
fighting for his legacy—
perhaps mistakenly.**

Alasdair MacIntyre speaking at University
College Dublin in 2009 (Sean O'Connor
/ CC BY 2.0 / Wikimedia Commons)





IT IS A CURIOUS THING when an artist, thinker, or writer gains influence outside the audience he intends or is comfortable with. When a thinker associated with the right becomes popular on the left, or a novelist associated with the progressive left becomes popular among conservative readers, there can be a sort of strain felt between the audience in fact and the “true” audience, or between those who feel themselves to be the authentic recipients of a work’s message and meaning and those who, to the true believers, come across as opportunistic in their enjoyment of works in tension with their own views. The same is true when a writer working within an

academic discipline gets picked up by those outside it: Those working within that discipline may find the co-opting of these thinkers misplaced at best or malicious at worst.

Such is perhaps the case with Alasdair MacIntyre, whose intellectual trajectory carried him from an early Marxism to a later Aristotelianism and finally into a form of Catholic Thomism. Along the way, speaking in and to those traditions, MacIntyre’s work was championed by each and picked up by others, and has now spilled out in its reception far beyond the walls of academic philosophy departments. MacIntyre’s influence is often marked on those associated with types of “conservatism” today, who count themselves critics of liberalism and work to understand its failings. That “influence,” however, is by no means uncontroversial, particularly in light of MacIntyre’s own direct disavowal of “conservatism” and refusal to engage with the so-called Benedict Option advanced by Rod Dreher, one of his prominent popular receptors.

In assessing MacIntyre’s legacy briefly here, I will avoid restating at length the high points and summaries of his writing that have been offered of late in the wake of his recent death. Instead, I start with his development as a thinker across time, which I take to be a model of intellectual virtue in the life of the mind. I then consider his influence on those outside his discipline and conclude with a reflection on philosophical biography more broadly.

In 1959, as a philosopher just entering his 30s, MacIntyre published a profound moral reflection in *The New Reasoner* titled “Notes from the Moral Wilderness.” *The New Reasoner* was a short-lived journal for communist dissidents, founded by those disaffected with the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary, as well as those grappling with the revelations occasioned by Khrushchev’s 1956 “Secret Speech” titled “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences.” Amid a mounting tide of evidence that Stalinist Russia was guilty of abhorrent crimes before, during, and after the Second World War, morally sensitive communists often became internal critics of their own tradition or else, as many did, became what MacIntyre called “ex-Communist[s] turned moral critic[s] of Communism.”

In “Notes,” MacIntyre outlines the difficult position of the moral critics of communism, standing as they often do within the liberal tradition that often acts as a “kind of photographic negative of Stalinism.”



Elekes Andor / CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Rod Dreher

Where the Stalinist “horizon of morality” is identical to “the course of history,” such that “the Stalinist identifies what is morally right with what is actually going to be the outcome of history,” the liberal moralist “puts himself outside history as a spectator. He invokes his principles as valid independently of the course of historical events.”

In MacIntyre’s account, liberal moralists have simply arbitrarily accepted a different moral system, not justified it. In other words, those sympathetic to Stalinism need merely ask, “Why do the moral standards by which Stalinism is found wanting have authority over us?” to render liberal criticisms relatively ineffective, or at least to put the ball of ethical justification back in the court of the liberal moralist.



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Khrushchev alongside Stalin in the 1930s

The problem with both approaches that MacIntyre identifies is that they are presented as a false dilemma, or at least that apart from these two options there is a third path: “What has to be done positively is to show that there is a third moral position,” one that does not fall “into the dogmatic ossifications of Stalinism” nor “the arbitrariness of liberal morality.” That is, a defensible ethical approach must not simply affirm that whatever happens in history is good in the abstract but must also show that it is justifiable. In short, a third moral option must “provide us with some conception of a basis of our moral standards.”

For all their acknowledged failings, Marxists preserve, MacIntyre argues, a “concept of human nature, a concept which has to be at the center of any moral

Starving people in Kharkiv during the famine in Soviet Ukraine (1935)



Alexander Wienerberger / Diocesan Archive of Vienna / Wikimedia Commons



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Thomas Aquinas by Antonio del Castillo y Saavedra

theory.” Unwilling as yet to discard Marxism itself, MacIntyre appeals to this idea of human nature as the means of self-criticism that would reject what he calls the “crude utilitarianism” of Stalinism. A similar argument was later advanced by Canadian political philosopher George Parkin Grant in his *Lament for a Nation*, originally published in 1965. Liberalism, Grant argues, presents no coherent account of human nature and thus lacks a moral core that could provide a limit to supposed “progress” in politics and technology. Marxism, for its part, at least maintains a conception of human good against which supposed “progress” must be compared. This conception of human good is the life raft for the moral core of Marxism in MacIntyre’s early writing, which he hopes keeps it from necessarily descending into the Stalinist error.

If MacIntyre’s early work introduces, for his liberal readers, some troubling questions about the moral status of Marxism in his thought, it also sets the stage for his own intellectual and moral development. In seeking a different path from both Stalinism and liberal theory, MacIntyre arrives at the tradition of virtue, first exemplified and expounded in the works of Aristotle and given new life and application in the Middle Ages through the work of philosopher-theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas. This tradition suggests there is something about how human beings are that gives us useful information about what is good for life as a human being. By studying a thing according to its nature, Aristotle and those who follow him wager, we can learn about what that thing is for and thus what would make that thing good. This tradition is both meaningfully in contact with reality

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**IT IS TEMPTING
FOR MACINTYRE’S
OSTENSIBLE FOLLOWERS
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KIND OF NOSTALGIA.**

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and justifiable, satisfying the conditions outlined in his earlier “Notes.”

It is tempting, however, for MacIntyre’s ostensible followers and critics to see in his virtue ethics a kind of nostalgia. When, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre proclaims boldly that we must choose between Nietzsche and Aristotle, those raised on worldview curricula and disaffected with the course of modernity instinctively know whom to choose. But in his prologue to the third edition of that same book, MacIntyre disavows a nostalgic approach to the past and a “careless misreading” of his work that would lead someone to this conclusion. He writes,

Because I understand the tradition of the virtues to have arisen within and to have been first adequately articulated in the Greek, especially the Athenian *polis*, and because I have stressed the ways in which that tradition flourished in the European middle ages, I have been accused of nostalgia and of idealizing the past. But there is, I think, not a trace of this in the text [of *After Virtue*]. What there is is an insistence on our need to learn from some aspects of the past, by understanding our contemporary selves and our contemporary moral relationships in the light afforded by a tradition that enables us to overcome the constraints on such self-knowledge that modernity, especially advanced modernity, imposes.

What is needed is not simply to sit down and memorize the Aristotelian corpus without modification. MacIntyre’s approach to philosophy understands the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, among other traditions, to be methods of moral “enquiry” rather than a rote accumulation of abstract dogma. Viewing ethics in this way forecloses both nostalgia and projects of naive recovery, despite the accusations of critics to the contrary. In embracing the virtue tradition, MacIntyre did not himself, nor teach others to, pick up and parrot Aristotle as a Bible, nor take any later development of virtue ethics as a copy-and-paste script for ethical living. He instead introduced the possibility of within-tradition refinement, an activity which all his receptors can take up.

Many of MacIntyre’s admirers come from fields outside his own; his influence is marked on social and political commentators, political theorists, and perhaps surprisingly those who study business management. The varied receptions of MacIntyre’s work have been



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Portrait of Aristotle by Francesco Hayez (1811)

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MACINTYRE DISAVOWS ANY LOYALTY TO ‘COMMUNITY’ AS A BASIC UNIT AND INSISTS THAT MANY ‘COMMUNITARIAN’ THINKERS AVOW ‘THE VALUES OF LIBERALISM’ HE OPENLY REJECTS.

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given expansive treatment in *Learning from MacIntyre*, a 2020 book edited by Ron Beadle and Geoff Moore. Beadle and Moore are themselves professors of business ethics, and MacIntyre’s influence on their work on virtue in the workplace and in business management has been strong. In their editorial introduction, they state that their purpose for the creation of the volume was for contributors to explain MacIntyre’s influence within their own discipline, assembling a delightful representative sample of the types of thinkers on whom MacIntyre has left a significant mark, from Frankfurt School critical theorists to Catholic social thought apologists and beyond.

In addition, interested readers will find in Christopher Stephen Lutz’s “Alasdair MacIntyre: An Intellectual Biography” a description of MacIntyre’s own intellectual movements as read through the stages of his scholarship, as well as moments of profound and enviable intellectual charity. Early in his career, Lutz explains, MacIntyre published an essay entitled “The Logical Status of Religious Belief,” where he presented what Lutz calls “a summary statement of MacIntyre’s fideistic philosophy of religion.” The essay was criticized by atheist philosopher Antony Flew and Christian theologian Basil Mitchell contemporaneous to its publication in 1957. When “Logical Status” was republished in 1970, Lutz wrote, “MacIntyre added a new preface in which he thanks Flew and Mitchell, along with his colleague Hepburn,

for their criticism, and rejected the essay’s ‘irrationalism as both false and dangerous.’” MacIntyre, it seems, faced critics who changed his mind and was happy to acknowledge their contributions.

If MacIntyre could sometimes take well the criticisms of his own work, those whom MacIntyre criticizes could certainly emulate and exercise the same charity. Among the readers of MacIntyre throughout his career have been other critics of liberalism who, MacIntyre complained, took him somehow to be on their “side” in ongoing debates. Again, in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre suggests he has been taken up as an ally to the “communitarians” in the academic debate between the communitarians and individualists. MacIntyre disavows any loyalty to “community” as a basic unit and insists that many “communitarian” thinkers avow “the values of liberalism” he openly rejects. As he puts it,

My own critique of liberalism derives from the judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed toward the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved. Liberal political societies are characteristically committed to denying any place for a determinate conception of the human good in their public discourse, let alone allowing that their common life should be grounded in such a conception.

He goes on to explain that “on the dominant liberal view, government is to be neutral as between rival conceptions of the good,” a neutral arbiter over a plurality of conceptions. However, “in fact what liberalism promotes is a kind of institutional order that is inimical to the construction and sustaining of the types of communal relationship required for the best kind of human life.” This critique of liberalism is thus thoroughgoing and all-encompassing, applying equally to the American right as it does to the American left. Those called “conservative,” MacIntyre says, are often wedded to things like free market economics that he takes to commit the characteristic errors of liberalism by undermining the conditions of those communal relationships.

It would take more space than I have here to articulate a response to this critique of liberalism, and any

I could articulate would surely fall short of defeating the arguments MacIntyre makes at length throughout his works. Many defenders have responded, and many critics of liberalism have shared and advanced his critiques, and I need not rehash the dialogue in full here.

It is crucial to note, however, that those who seek to defend liberalism at length are done great favors by MacIntyre in his work. These defenders of liberalism cannot cleanly embrace MacIntyre's thought wholesale, else they would no longer be defenders of liberalism. Despite this inherent tension, they would do well to acknowledge that MacIntyre has, through his decades of scholarship, presented perhaps the key argument that must be addressed when defending liberalism, particularly by those with philosophical or religious commitments MacIntyre takes to be contrary to liberalism.

Those Christians, for example, who believe in a “determinate conception of the human good” and yet still defend liberal institutions, markets, and the rest must do so, if they hope to be most effective defenders of liberalism, in the terms that MacIntyre set. They must, in other words, find something within liberalism that does not undermine those features essential to the “best kind of human life.” A committed liberal, faced with MacIntyre's work, then can become a self-improving advocate of liberalism, seeking within the tradition the practices that can sustain this kind of life.

This is no easy task. The stage for the argument, however, was set at least as far back as MacIntyre's “Notes from the Moral Wilderness”: A compelling moral critique of communism must come from a system that can demonstrate it has not been arbitrarily chosen, but one whose good for human beings as human beings is demonstrable. In this task at least, MacIntyre believes liberalism has failed. Its proponents must rise to its defense on these terms, perhaps by articulating how a definite conception of human good can be articulated within the liberal tradition and how the communal relationships that foster that good can be protected and preserved, rather than undermined, by liberalism.

One such attempt at advancing this project came famously from the work done by Rod Dreher in *The Benedict Option*. For many outside academia, Dreher's writing was a kind of introduction to MacIntyre through the famous conclusion to the latter's *After Virtue*, where he says that the modern world awaits “another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”

Interpreting this passage himself in the prologue to *After Virtue's* third edition, MacIntyre wrote:

Benedict's greatness lay in making possible a quite new kind of institution, that of the monastery of prayer, learning, and labor, in which and around which communities could not only survive, but flourish in a period of social and cultural darkness. ...It was my intention to suggest, when I wrote that last sentence in 1980, that ours too is a time of resisting as prudently and courageously and justly and temperately as possible the dominant social, economic, and political order of advanced modernity. So it was twenty-six years ago, so it is still.

Taking these sections and his understanding of MacIntyre as a whole, Dreher set out in his *Benedict Option* to cast a vision for Christian communities that would fulfill this role. His work has often been criticized for advocating kinds of Christian enclaves, whereas MacIntyre's praise of St. Benedict was for the monk's creation of monastic communities that integrated into their surrounding secular communities to the benefit of each in this “period of social and cultural darkness.” Modern versions would do this not by rejecting or undermining the surrounding liberal order but rather by taking advantage of the

Portrait of St. Benedict by Herman Nieg (1926)





Monastery at Monte Cassino, founded in 529 by St. Benedict of Nursia

resources offered by liberal freedoms to establish parallel communities pursuing Christian goods, preserving habits and practices against the surrounding culture that so often undermined them.

When publicly questioned about Dreher's book and his influence on it, MacIntyre disavowed it, much as he had previously disavowed his conservative and communitarian admirers. His accusation was that the sentence was read in isolation and was being used, ironically, to advocate for "a withdrawal from society into isolation," a form of conservatism that was just a "mirror image" of liberalism.

Dreher, for his part, also disavowed that his advocacy was for "withdrawal" into "isolation," but was instead supporting what he calls a "strategic withdrawal" for the sake of creating new practices and institutions that can foster the kind of life in the pursuit of virtue that MacIntyre praises. This rebuttal is, charitable readers of the book might find, a fair one. A more interesting criticism might be that advanced by Scott P. Richert in his 2017 review of *The Benedict Option* for *Crisis Magazine*, namely that the Benedict Option as a project "reads back on Benedict's establishment of monasticism in the West an intent that is both far grander in scope yet far more mundane in purpose than what Benedict had in mind. What Benedict had in mind was to serve God, and through

him his fellow man." Insofar as a Benedict Option is pursued as an intentional project of Christian preservation against a hostile culture, a set of guidelines for a "movement" rather than a pursuit of practical wisdom, it is likely still to fall to MacIntyre's rebuttal.

MacIntyre's body of work includes several instances of philosophical biographies, treatments of major figures or thinkers whose lives and thought cannot be meaningfully separated. Long-time readers of MacIntyre were somewhat surprised, for example, to find a large portion of his final completed book, *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity*, devoted to descriptions of the lives of four figures ranging from a Soviet writer to an American Supreme Court justice. Thus far in the book, he writes, he has laid out the following conclusion: "It is that agents do well only if and when they act to satisfy only those desires whose objects they have good reason to desire, that only agents who are sound and effective practical reasoners so act, that such agents must be disposed to act as the virtues require, and that such agents will be directed in their actions toward the achievement of their final end."

If I may be so bold as to summarize, MacIntyre's point seems to be that, as Aristotle says, virtuous people, prudent people, will desire and feel what they

ought, will act on the basis of these desires in their practical lives, and in so doing will be pursuing their “final end.” MacIntyre further says that such a philosophical conclusion “can be understood adequately only by attention to the detail of particular cases that in significant ways exemplify it, not imaginary examples, but real examples.” In other words, we must see philosophy practiced by practical reasoners making choices on good bases. We learn much about philosophy, then, from the lives of those exercising practical reasoning, not just from the reading of texts or the contemplation of concepts.

Readers approaching MacIntyre will find, I argue, a life that models those about which MacIntyre himself wrote. His intellectual trajectory showed a willingness to enter into conversations with rival traditions, to take their insights into account, and to, most importantly, change his mind. As the figures MacIntyre writes on in *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity* and elsewhere can serve as models for readers, so too can MacIntyre’s own philosophical biography. This need not be the equivalent of hagiography; MacIntyre says that those he studies in

his book “are agents who are, like the rest of us, not yet fully rational, who are still learning how to act rightly and well.” They serve ultimately as models or guides, moral exemplars as virtue ethicists often describe them.

I once had the opportunity to meet writer and director Martin McDonagh. At the time, McDonagh was filming *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* outside Asheville, North Carolina, and he made an appearance there at a local indie bookstore for a Q&A time and a meet-and-greet. When given the chance to ask him a question, I seemed to stump him a bit. I attend a small, conservative, Christian liberal arts college, I explained, and your movie *In Bruges* is a campus favorite. The mostly conservative Christian college students simply love your work. Why is that, do you think? He laughed and said he couldn’t possibly make sense of the appeal.

In a similar, though more serious way, MacIntyre remains an influence on those far outside his own discipline, even those with whom he shared significant disagreement. MacIntyre’s responses during his life to those who saw him as an ally might suggest that those who associate with the American conservative movement and its offshoots are reading him poorly, co-opting him badly, and so on. But to the extent that we agree with MacIntyre about the necessity of ethical enquiry, to the extent that the practice of philosophy is meaningfully a practice and not simply a collection of abstract principles, it seems to be a thoroughly MacIntyrean approach to place his philosophy in conversation with one’s own, to extend his insights into contemporary moral and political debates, to take on the intellectual virtues he modeled of entering into the traditions of others, assessing them internally, interrogating our own traditions with similar rigor, and above all to be willing to change our minds when this enquiry leads us to new conclusions. MacIntyre modeled this in his work and life, and those who want truly to adopt his method, rather than take his developing thought as dogma, should go and do likewise. **RL**



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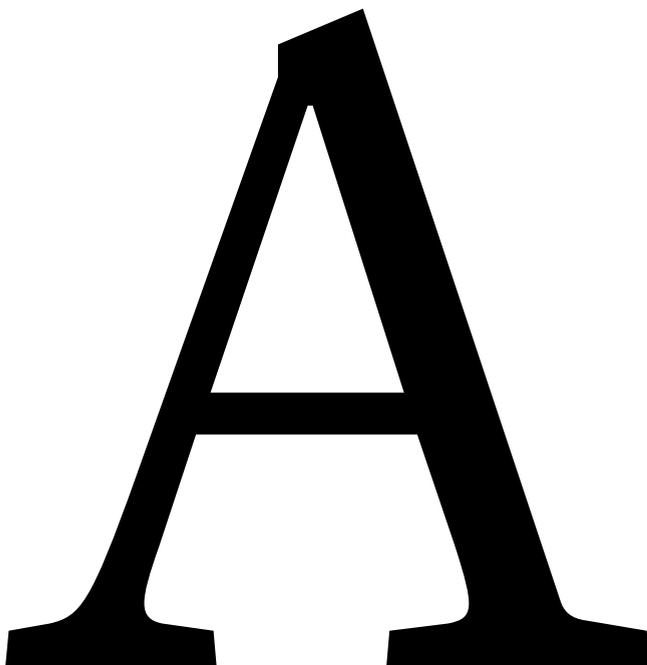


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THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

by **JORDAN J. BALLOR**

“Christ is King” has become a popular internet meme. It’s doubtful that its users know what they are saying. They are in good company.



ATOP A WOOD CARVING of Christ on the cross, affixed to St. Vitus Cathedral, is a sign with the letters I-N-R-I. The origin of these letters is related to us in the 19th chapter of the Gospel of John:

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews. Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”



I-N-R-I carving above Christ at Prague’s St. Vitus Cathedral

Artistic portrayals of the crucifixion would often render this by using an acronym of the letters of the words in Latin: *Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudæorum*: I-N-R-I.

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. In this notice Pilate has unwittingly provided a concise summary of Jesus’s true identity. We have his proper name—Jesus—and a modifier of his home region in the north, Nazareth. And we have a title: King of the Jews. Between Nazareth and Judea is a picture of a united Israel, which had been split into two kingdoms after the time of Solomon.

Pilate undoubtedly thought of the identity of this people geographically: Judea was that little tract of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean where he had been installed as Roman governor, and home to a troublesome people known as Judeans or Jews. We of course realize that, while Jesus was a Jew born into that area in the first century, the status and significance of the people and nation of Israel is far greater than Pilate recognized.

Jesus was born to Mary in what the apostle Paul calls “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4) to reconcile Israel and, indeed, the world, to God. And here we can see the connection between those two other words written by Pilate: IESUS and REX, or Jesus and King.

The name *Jesus* is fundamental to his identity. When Gabriel visits Mary to announce the good news of his birth, he instructs her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” Jesus, or *Iēsous* in the Greek, is a form of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, or Joshua, which means “The Lord is salvation.” And just as Joshua led the people into the Promised Land

after their time of captivity in Egypt, Jesus would lead his people into a new kingdom.

So in the name *Jesus*, given before his birth, we see an anticipation of his work of salvation. Jesus is the redeemer, the savior. But as Gabriel continues in his message to Mary, this son is not only a savior—he is also a king. Thus, says Gabriel, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. This is his identity from before his birth to after his death. Both Gabriel and Pilate affirm the same truth about his identity: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Indeed, he is the Savior of all God’s people and King of all the world. The focus of this essay is on Jesus Christ as a king—and not just any king, but the King of kings and the Lord of lords. As we look at the nature of his kingdom, however, we will see how this kingdom differs in many and radical ways from the kingdoms of this world.

As Christians we must avoid seeking a kingdom without a king, focusing so much on impacting this world for the good that we forget who Christ is for us and for our world. But we also want to avoid claiming to have a king without having any sense of his kingdom. Every king needs a kingdom, and every lord needs a people. How much more is this true of the King of kings and the Lord of lords?

The kingdom of God, Jesus tells us, is like a pearl and a leaven. The kingdom considered as a pearl

teaches us that God’s kingdom is *upside down*. It undoes our expectations about what is valuable. It reverses our understanding of what our relationships in and to this world mean. It revolutionizes our vision of what matters to God and what ought to matter to us.

The kingdom is also a leaven. The kingdom considered as a leavening agent in the world turns our perspective on the world *inside out*. We see how the gospel radically changes our hearts, making us alive again and sensible to what God wills in the world. Through our remade hearts and transformed minds, God uses our entire person to act as his agents of renewal in the world.

In Matthew 13, Jesus is teaching the crowds about the kingdom of heaven through a series of parables, one of which is called the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value. It goes like this:

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt. 13:45–46)

The kingdom is a reality of such value, such significance, that it radically changes the way we relate to everything else. The kingdom is itself of the utmost value—and it changes all other values. It turns our evaluation of the world on its head.

That Jesus taught the crowds in parables and explained those parables to his disciples doesn’t mean that his followers always understood what he meant by them. Consider the case of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. In Mark 10 we read their

The Annunciation by Fra Angelico (c. 1440–1445)



Crossing the Jordan by Benjamin West (1800)





The Pearl of Great Price by Domenico Fetti (c. 1618–19)

petition: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” This is a request that recognizes Jesus to be a king. He will be enthroned in glory, and the sons of Zebedee want to have places of honor at his left and right hand.

But it is clear that James and John do not understand how the kingdom of God works. Their world- and lifeview has not yet been transformed by this new vision of a heavenly kingdom. Indeed, Jesus tells them: “You do not know what you are asking.” Their request doesn’t make sense in the logic of Christ’s kingdom.

James and John are working under the assumptions of worldly power and worldly kingship. From the fall into sin, the story of worldly authority was that the stronger ruled over the weaker. Part of the curse was that Adam would “rule over” Eve (Gen. 3:16). Cain was more powerful than Abel, and killed him. Cain’s descendant Lamech would continue that same pattern. He bragged: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times” (Gen. 4:23).

The strong and great make the rules. And since James and John understood Jesus to be the greatest,

it made sense that he could decide who would be honored at his right and his left hand.

But listen to what Jesus tells them, and take to heart what this means for how his kingdom would be run. First, Jesus says something strange. He answers them not by saying he is all-powerful and can do anything he wants. He doesn’t say it’s up to him who is honored in his kingdom and that he could honor James and John in the way they ask but just doesn’t want to. No—Jesus confesses a kind of powerlessness: “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” We know of course that the Son of God was involved in the creation and plan for the consummated kingdom. But as God incarnated, Jesus of Nazareth is not here to act arbitrarily as an earthly king or tyrant might, to lift some up to places of honor simply because he can.

Jesus continues:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be

first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Here we see clearly that we have a king who is different from other kings, and his kingdom is different from other kingdoms. Christ's kingdom takes worldly ways of ruling and turns them upside down. "My kingdom," says Jesus, "is not of this world." And indeed it must have seemed otherworldly to James and John when they got that kind of answer from Jesus.

The kingdom of God is a pearl of great value that must cause us to pursue it above all else and to revalue everything else in light of that reality.

The kingdom considered as a pearl of great value must make us rethink and reorient how we relate to earthly rulers. But it also changes and relativizes all our other earthly relationships. Consider what Jesus taught about those strongest of human bonds, that of love and obedience between family members. In Matthew 12 we read that "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

The bonds of love and obedience to God are the primary characteristics of the kingdom of God, transcending and revaluing all other such bonds, even to those of our own parents, siblings, and children. Rather than the rule of the stronger over the weaker, or the greater over the lesser, we have a kingdom defined by obedience to the will of God, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

There's a wonderful image of this in C.S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce*. In this allegory, the narrator

travels through heaven and hell. At one point in his visit to heaven, he sees a grand parade, and following on a procession of bright, musical spirits he spots "a lady in whose honour all this was being done." The narrator is so impressed by the procession, and by her beauty and grace, by the "clarity with which her innermost spirit shone through [her] clothes," that he thinks she might be Mary, the mother of Jesus. He asks his guide: "Is it...?" Could it be her?

To this the guide responds: "Not at all. It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on Earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green." The narrator is still working under the assumptions of worldly greatness. He thinks she obviously must be "a person of particular importance." This is true. She is, as the guide relates, "one of the great ones." But what makes her great in heaven is not what makes people great on Earth. Or, as the guide puts it, "Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things." What made her great in the kingdom of God was her love: Every person, "every beast and bird that came near her had its place in her love. In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them."

Fame and greatness in the kingdom of God and fame and greatness on Earth are two quite different things. This is what James and John failed to recognize when they asked Jesus to honor them by placing them at his left and right hand. This is what the merchant who sought the pearl of great price did recognize.

The kingdom of God causes us to revalue everything. But does this mean that the world itself is of no value? Does this revaluation utterly evacuate the Earth of significance and meaning? Does this turning upside down of our values mean that only our eternal destiny matters?

Consider also Jesus's teaching at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, where he contrasts worries about this world with concerns about the kingdom of God. Just as worldly people value strength, power, fame, and greatness in earthly terms, so too do worldly people seek the goods of the world to fulfill their desires and needs.

But Jesus instructs us: "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25). Or, as the Apostle Paul has it, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of

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righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

God knows that we need earthly things to live; he has created us to use these things rightly. The radical reevaluation of earthly goods in light of the pearl of great value does not thereby devalue everything else. Rather, it helps us to value rightly everything else: Seek first God’s kingdom and all other things will be rightly ordered in light of that transcendent reality.

We have seen that the kingdom of God is a pearl of great value, revolutionizing our perspective of the things of this world and the world to come. As Jesus describes it in that series of parables in Matthew 13, the kingdom is also a leaven: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened” (Matt. 13:33).

The kingdom of God as leaven works from the inside out. The gospel call and the Spirit’s working regenerate the human person, healing our hearts and manifesting that new life in a renewal of our place in the world. Remember what the narrator in *The Great Divorce* says about Sarah Smith: “The abundance of

life she has in Christ from the father flows into them” and into every created thing she encounters.”

The leavening work of the kingdom is just like this. As Lewis’s narrator continues, “It is like when you throw a stone into a pool, and the concentric waves spread out further and further. Who knows where it will end?”

The kingdom understood as a pearl places the spiritual and eternal destiny of humanity at the forefront; the kingdom as a leaven takes that newly revalued earthly life and invigorates it with significance. Here’s how the great Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper describes it:

The kingdom of God that is being established and is being reclaimed from Satan must certainly manifest itself in spiritual powers and marvelous glories, but still, it consists first of all of people. A kingdom of God without a people of God is impossible. Therefore the battle against Satan consists not only in reclaiming from Satan the spiritual treasures of human life, but first of all in retrieving human beings from Satan, both in body and soul.

The Parable of the Leaven by John Everett Millais (c. 1860)



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Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920)



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The kingdom of God is not simply about the world to come; it is about this world, too. It isn't simply about the salvation of souls; it is about the salvation of human persons, body and soul, and the resurrection of the body as well as the immortality of the soul.

Christ's kingdom is not *of* this world, but it is a kingdom that exists *for* this world—for its redemption, salvation, restoration, and consummation.

The people of God are the salt, light, and leaven in the world as it stands between Christ's first and second coming. The church fathers described the faithful presence of Christians in the Roman world in precisely these terms. The second-century Letter to Diognetus says that

What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world.

The second-century apologist Tertullian likewise wrote to the Roman authorities to defend Christians as active throughout the world, serving the public good through their faithful presence:

We sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor workshop, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce. We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your traffickings—even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit.

The kingdom of God is a leaven, working for renewal and reconciliation in the world. That means that each member of God's kingdom has some important work to do. If Christ is our king, then we are his stewards, set in charge of some place, some corner of his world. Each follower of Christ has a stewardship responsibility to be a channel of grace and renewal in his kingdom, which is to be manifest over more and more of the created order.

Christ takes us in our worldly situations—our families, our careers, our communities, our nations—and claims us for his own. He calls us to radically reorient our loyalties and our identities, but those newly ordered loyalties and identities likewise radically



CHRIST CALLS US TO RADICALLY REORIENT OUR LOYALTIES AND OUR IDENTITIES.



free us to serve both God and our neighbors in and through those very same relationships. We serve God and further his kingdom by loving others through our various callings, our different places of responsibility throughout society and the world.

For some that means primarily being a parent; for others it means being a preacher or a teacher or a plumber or (dare I say) a theologian, and by God's grace, even a politician. *With God all things are possible.*

At about the same time as the wooden crucifix mentioned above was being constructed in 14th-century Prague, a poem was being composed in late-medieval England.

This poem is called "Pearl" and relates the story of a father whose very young daughter has died. The father grieves and visits her grave, and in the midst of his lament receives a vision of heaven. As he encounters this heavenly reality, he sees a young woman. In the same way that the narrator in Lewis's *Great Divorce* sees a young woman so full of grace and light that he erroneously takes her for Mary, so too does the father in "Pearl" think that this young woman must be the God-bearer. "Are you the queen of heavens blue / Whom all must honour on earth that fare?" he wonders.

The young woman responds that the man is mistaken. He has confused greatness in God's kingdom with the standards of greatness on earth:

The court where the living God doth reign
Hath a virtue of its own being,
That each who may thereto attain
Of all the realm is queen or king,
Yet never shall other's right obtain,
But in other's good each glorying
and wishing each crown worth five again,
If amended might be so fair a thing.

In God's kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young
goat,
and the calf and the lion and
the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
(Isaiah 11:6)

The father's worldly ways of evaluating and judging persist. When he finds out that the young woman he takes for a queen is not Mary but is in fact his deceased daughter, he thinks that such honor cannot be right. She was just a young child when she died and had done nothing to merit such treatment. "That courtesy gives its gifts too free," he says. His daughter was not even two years old before she died, not even old enough to know the Lord's Prayer or the Creed. "I cannot believe," he says,

God helping me,
That God so far from right would stray.
Of a countess, damsel, I must say,
"Twere fair in heaven to find the grace,
of a lady even of less array;
But a queen! It is too high a place.

The lady corrects him with a lengthy response, invoking the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20) to expound the prodigal abundance of God's grace. She refers to the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value in explaining the excelling grandeur of God's kingdom. And she refers to the biblical teaching of Christ:

Then Jesus summoned his servants mild,
And said His realm no man might win,
Unless he came there as a child;
Else never should he come therein.

"Truly, I say to you," Jesus tells us in Matthew 18, "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3-4).

Greatness in the kingdom of heaven and greatness on Earth are not the same things at all. The kingdom of heaven is a pearl turning our values upside down and a leaven working from the inside out.

Jesus Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords and the crown our King wore at his greatest triumph is a crown of thorns. Our King is the suffering servant. As we read in the book of Hebrews:

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:8-9)

In laying down his life, Christ gains life—abundant life—for his people. Christ's kingdom is a pearl of great value. By comparison, everything else is worth nothing. This is why Paul says:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. (Phil. 3:8-9)

Paul counts everything else as "rubbish," filth, slime, muck—and even stronger language than that.

But everything we "lose" from the upside-down revolution in the kingdom as a pearl of great value, we never truly had to begin with. And when we receive the gift of that pearl, we get everything else back, and receive it truly for the first time when we give into the inside-out reality of the kingdom as leaven, working as agents of God's grace in its various forms.

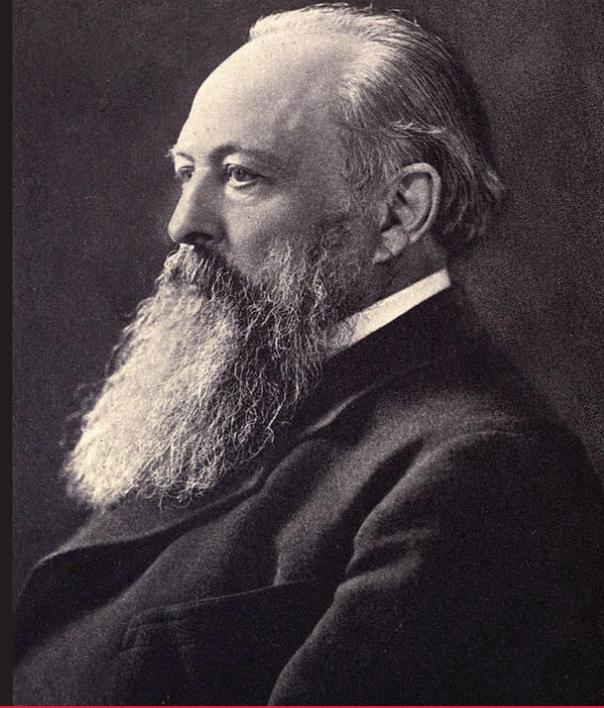
"Aim at heaven," says C.S. Lewis, "and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."

The kingdom of heaven is a pearl and a leaven. We follow a risen savior: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. It is this King, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray to the Father:

Thy *kingdom* come,
thy *will* be done,
on *earth*
as it is in *heaven*.
Amen. **RL**

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“Liberty is not ...
the power of doing what we like,
but the right of being able to do
what we ought.”

- LORD ACTON

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From *Bible Beasts and Birds: A New Edition of Illustrations of Scripture by an Animal Painter*, published in London by Kegan Paul, Trench & Co. (1886)



How one French-American intellectual has inspired a renewed interest in what it means to battle negative desires, and how the Resurrection is our only hope.

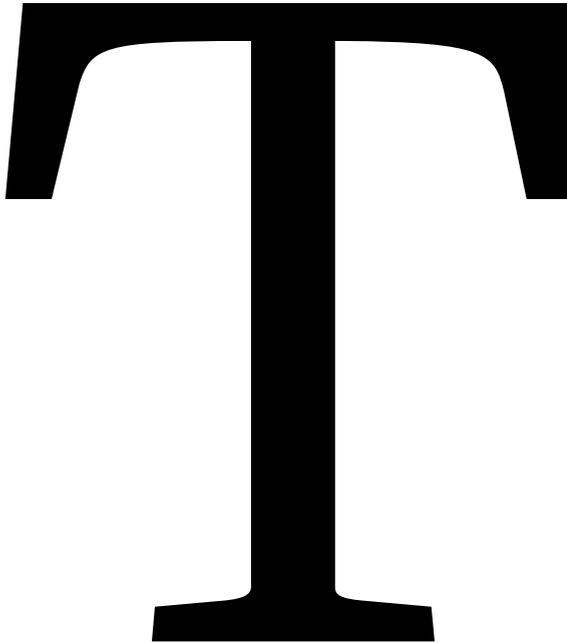
and the Goat shall bear upon him all



THE ATONING DEATH OF THE LAST SCAPEGOAT

by FR. ELIAS CARR

their iniquities unto a land not inhabited



THE BILLIONAIRE CO-FOUNDER of PayPal, Peter Thiel, considers René Girard “heroic and subversive.” Vice President J.D. Vance, who learned of Girard through Thiel, attributes in part his decision to enter full communion with the Catholic Church in 2019 to Girard. Why is interest in an obscure French-American scholar who died a decade ago rapidly growing, and what can we learn from him?

If the Roman playwright Plautus is correct when he states that a name is a prophecy (*nomen est omen*), then Girard’s name overflows with meaning: René (*renatus*, reborn), Noël (the birthday of the Lord, from *natalis dies Domini*), and Théophile (Theophilus,

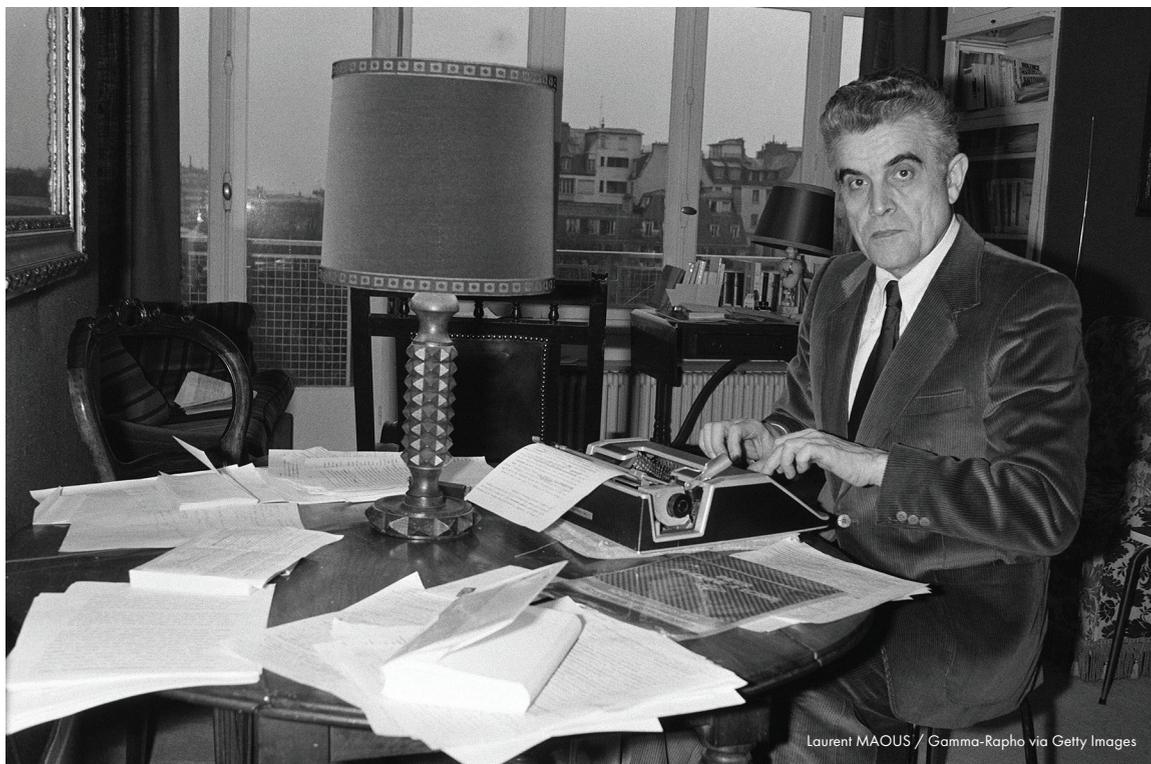
[Θεόφιλε], meaning loved by God/lover of God). Girard was born in Avignon on Christmas in 1923 to an anti-clerical Dreyfusard, the Jesuit-educated *archiviste-paléographe* Joseph Frédéric Marie Girard (1881–1962), and a Catholic mother, Marie-Thérèse de Loye Babre (1893–1967), who was the first woman in the region to earn a *baccalauréat* (secondary school degree), a distinction that only 2.5% of the French held in 1931.

Arriving in Paris in 1943 to attend his father’s alma mater, the renowned *École Nationale des Chartes*, the southerner from the periphery hated the metropole. Girard’s decision to write his dissertation at Indiana University in 1947 gave him the opportunity to become a transatlantic thinker. Writes Cynthia L. Havens in her biography *Evolution of Desire*: “This is why Girard is, like Tocqueville, a great *French* thinker—and a great *French* moralist—who could yet nowhere else exist but in the *United States*.” Girard wed the American Martha McCullough in 1952, and in the ensuing years their children, Martin, Daniel, and Mary, joined the family.

Failing to obtain a position at Indiana, Girard left for Duke University and then Bryn Mawr. In 1958 he was wrestling with the implications of the discoveries he would later publish in his first major work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961). Girard was increasingly preoccupied with the similarities between religious experience and the writings of certain novelists who were brave enough to admit that our desires are not our own but rather come from a model. This Girard would call mimetic desire. Finally, he underwent an intellectual conversion. “Everything was there at the beginning, all together. That’s why I don’t have any doubts. There’s no ‘Girardian system.’ I’m teasing out a single, extremely dense insight” (Havens’s *When These Things Begin*).

In the Lent of the 1959, Girard underwent a spiritual conversion that returned him to the Catholic faith he had ceased to practice as an adolescent. A lesion on his forehead raised the specter of cancer. The first test was inconclusive. In the intervening weeks before he received the happy news that it was not cancerous, Girard experienced a kind of death and resurrection. Summarizing, Havens writes, “The consent of the will occurred in what he [Girard] called the ‘first conversion’ experience. The second conversion gave him urgency, depth, and the endurance to take the next steps in the journey.”

That journey would take him to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, then to SUNY-Buffalo, back to Johns



Laurent MAOUS / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

René Girard in Paris, France, in 1979

Hopkins, and then finally, in 1981, he became the Andrew B. Hammond Professor of French Language, Literature, and Civilization at Stanford University, where he taught until his retirement in 1995.

In 2005, the members of the prestigious *Académie française* elected René Girard as one of the forty *immortels*, acknowledging his intellectual achievements. Girard's friend and colleague from Stanford, Michel Serres, named him "the new Darwin of the human sciences." Such recognition, however, eluded Girard in America. For many, his works were too Christian and therefore safely ignored.

On November 4, 2015, Girard died peacefully in his home in Stanford, California, at the age of 91. At the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, Serres offered a eulogy: "From that day on [Easter], the new earth, virgin, and mother, generates a new era where time, newly oriented, turns its back on death. Death no longer lies before our time, as our term, but flees, defeated, behind us." The Resurrection of Christ changes everything. Girard's life and writings offer a glimpse of the new world brought into being on Easter morning, which forges ahead nearly two millennia later.

Girard spent more than 40 years teasing out his "single, extremely dense insight." Chronologically, Girard made three discoveries: mimetic desire, the scapegoat mechanism, and Christ. However, epistemologically, the order is reversed. The revelation of the mimetic desire and especially of the scapegoat mechanism depends on the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Let me explain.

Through his study of novels in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard argued that human desires are mimetic, or imitative of another's desire. While needs (*appétit*) are grounded in biology, wants (*désir*) are influenced strongly by other people who model desires; hence, we imitate and adopt their desires (mimetic). Indeed, because wants and needs blend, the role of the model affects both wants and needs. In either case, however, what is desirable in the other is not ultimately any particular thing—whether it be a person, a relationship, an object, an experience, or a feeling—but *being* itself. "All desire is a desire for being," insisted Girard.

Beyond the object—whatever or whoever that might be—is desire's true aim: the model's being.



A 1951 advertisement for Coca-Cola

This metaphysical hunger causes the acquisitive nature of human desire. Poor in both being and desires, the subject seeks to appropriate the being of the other, the model, through imitating what the other desires, through adopting his words, deeds, and relationships, ultimately *becoming* the other. This is the basis for advertising and marketing, associating a good or service with an attractive model. Strange as it seems, though we are radically dependent on God, creation, and others, our modern worldview lies to us, insisting that we are independent as individuals and that we alone determine our desires.

This delusion Girard calls the “Romantic lie.” The French title of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (*Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*) plays on the word “novel” (*roman*) and the 19th-century philosophy of Romanticism, which celebrated creativity, genius, and originality, especially in the arts. Girard prized those novelists who had the honesty to acknowledge the Romantic lie in the face of this novelistic truth. In Girard’s view, this would entail a death and resurrection experience, of the ego dying through the truth that it is held in bondage to mimesis, and rising with a new sense of humility because it no longer fears the truth that one is not original but rather just like everyone else.

Mimetic desires influence us profoundly. We rationalize them, telling ourselves that this is really who I am or what I want. Then, believing this, we act upon these desires and demand that others affirm their legitimacy. As long as we are unaware of the mimetic nature of our desires, we will likely fail to engage them critically, thereby falling into a circle of frustration.

Girard also noticed that mimetic desire unavoidably gives rise to rivalries because the desires of different individuals often converge on the same object, like kids fighting over videogames or adults competing for position and prestige. Distance in a social rather than a spatial sense is the key variable in whether such mimetic desire will lead to peaceful imitation or violent conflict. Sufficient distance between individuals prevents the escalation to the extreme because it places the contending subjects far enough apart to make conflict unlikely. Girard calls this “external mediation.” Its opposite, “internal mediation,” refers to too little distance, which makes rivalry likely. Luke Burgis explains this distinction amusingly by naming two domains: Celebristan consists of those people who are a great distance from us (celebrities, fictional characters, historical figures, leaders), whereas Freshmanistan is populated by those who are close to us (colleagues, friends, acquaintances, family members).

Whenever a mediator—that is, the subject’s model—senses the subject’s interest in the object, this causes “double mediation.” Put simply, both now mediate desire to each other. The mediator or model’s desire is enflamed because the subject now becomes a model for him. Driving, for example, easily becomes a mimetic rivalry of double mediation. When one detects that someone is trying to pass, suddenly there is a competition in which there are winners and





A sign restricting seating at the Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport in 2021

losers. So you speed up. What does the other driver do? Who will win? Why are we competing?

Driving can be an intensely mimetic activity because human beings can have multiple models, multiple rivalries. Moreover, double mediation does not exist in a vacuum but rather in a social context where multiple conflicts rage. In most groups, factions and parties coalesce, subsuming interpersonal conflicts. Groups that were once at odds form alliances against their common enemies, leaving previous disagreement behind—at least for the moment. Girard calls the communal character of mimetic rivalry a plague or social contagion.

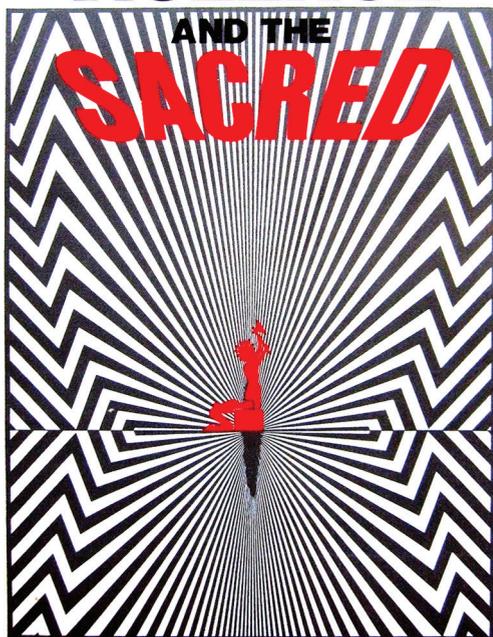
When Girard speaks of premodern plagues as a mimetic crisis, as in Oedipus's Thebes, he is not denying its biological character but rather emphasizing its equally social character. The recent pandemic made this clear. In the name of health and security, opposite conclusions were drawn. Each group accused the other of sacrificing someone: either the elderly, the immune-compromised, and the poor, or the young, the healthy, and the self-employed. It moreover called into question the boundaries between nature and culture, biology and politics, science and ideology. This blurring signifies a mimetic crisis when all differentiation between people collapses under the weight of the mimetic contagion. This lack of difference, which for Girard means that all become

identical, announces the threat of imminent violence.

The cycle of attraction and repulsion continues until a final resolution. For interpersonal conflict, this means the murder or expulsion of the model-obstacle (such as defriending someone on Facebook). On a societal level, as these interpersonal rivalries multiply, however, they threaten to destroy the whole community unless a scapegoat presents itself. The process of shifting from a war of all against all to a war of all against one happens mysteriously. When the group converges on the culprit—often bearing stereotypical qualities—the community naively blames the scapegoat for its crisis.

Scapegoating is so obvious today that it is nearly impossible for us to imagine a world in which no one recognizes what is happening. Yet, despite this knowledge, we continue to seek scapegoats and sometimes find ourselves in the position of the one who is scapegoated. It happens in families, workplaces, teams, and classrooms, as well as communities, nations—even globally. There is someone who is always ruining everything, who is annoying, who is the cause of what's wrong with the world, or so it seems. Girard does not claim that the scapegoat is innocent in the sense that he or she has never done anything wrong. The point is that the scapegoat is no guiltier of causing the disturbance in

VIOLENCE



RENÉ GIRARD
TRANSLATED BY PATRICK GREGORY



A depiction of the idol Moloch, associated with child sacrifice

the group than anyone else. The scapegoat just gets the blame, but everyone is part of the conflict. None is without sin.

Girard uses the term “scapegoating” as we do today, but he also employs a specific term, the “scapegoat mechanism,” to describe the circumstances when and where it generated culture in the past, something it is no longer able to do. Girard first articulates the scapegoat mechanism in his breakthrough work, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972). Through the expulsion of the scapegoat, the community experiences reconciliation and peace. This sudden transformation is so uncanny and strange that the victim comes to be seen as supernatural. A double transference occurs: The victim is first demonized and then sacralized. Thus, violence makes the sacred. Persons or institutions that restrain violence, such as government, Girard calls the *Katéchon* (cf. 2 Thess. 2:6–7). Ritual sacrifice, myth, and prohibitions safeguard the new culture by restraining mimetic rivalry. *Ritual sacrifice* reenacts the event, *myth* retells it, and *prohibitions* hinder mimetic rivalry.

Girard believes that ritual is the first teacher of humanity because *repetitio est mater studiorum* (repetition is the mother of all study). Ritual repetition, therefore, is decisive for understanding cultural evolution. The millennial performance of ritual sacrifice educated the first human beings, thereby giving rise to all the major institutions that form human culture (cf. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*). Long before there were any secular institutions, whose origins depend on the desacralization or secularization brought about by the gospel, religion (or the sacred) was the mother of all culture. Ritual sacrifice created the social harmony and cooperation that stabilized desire-driven humanity.

Prohibitions arise to secure peace by forbidding those behaviors that incite mimetic rivalry. The new cultural order therefore sanctifies rules of conduct. In this lay the origins of law, the judiciary, and its enforcement. Inasmuch as mimetic desire focuses on the neighbor and his possessions, prohibitions interrupt this desire by making the neighbor and his possessions distant and unapproachable, at least in a moral sense.

Girard argues that the scapegoat mechanism only works if the group believes in its own innocence and the guilt of the victim. He calls this *méconnaissance*, the state of misrecognizing what has actually taken place. If there is a significant doubt about the guilt of the victim, then the mimetic crisis continues. For this



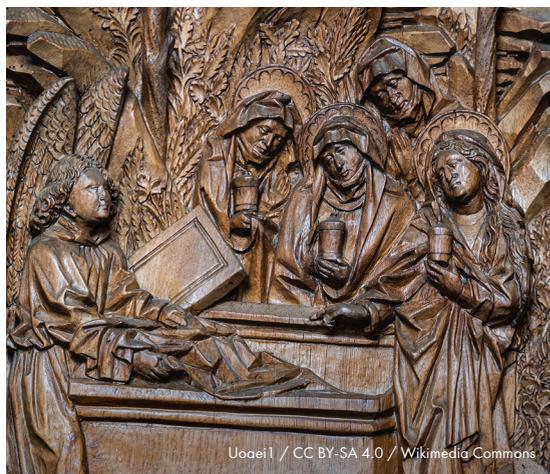
Agnus-Dei: The Scapegoat by James Tissot (1886–94)

reason, a crisis may consume many victims before the scapegoat mechanism produces its beneficial effects.

Moreover, in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard argues that the violent origins of culture remained hidden until the Paschal Mystery revealed the scapegoat mechanism specifically and our penchant for scapegoating more generally. Girard reasons that the structural similarity between the Passion of Jesus and myths is necessary for the revelation of both the scapegoat mechanism and the innocence of the victim. The Passion narratives describe a scapegoating event like any other. Yet what makes this one different is that it does not end with the demonization and death of the victim, but rather with his resurrection and vindication.

Jesus offers his life on the cross in union with his Father to introduce a new power in the world that is stronger than mimesis and scapegoating. That new power is the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete, who overcomes the misrecognition of the victim as guilty, making the scapegoat mechanism hidden, effective, and capable of creating a new culture. When we scapegoat, we blame others for our problems, yet there is always a nagging doubt. The Resurrection makes profound this skepticism about our own goodness and the guilt of the other.

To his frightened and confused disciples, Christ revealed the truth about the God who does not destroy his murderers or betrayers but rather offers forgiveness, as well as the truth about humanity's deep relationship to violence. Through the Resurrection, the one whom the crowd and their



The Three Marys at the Tomb of Christ (1470) in Germany

leaders judged as a blasphemer (Matt. 26:65) and accursed by God (see Deut. 21:23), and whom the procurator, Pontius Pilate, representing the *Katêchon* of his day, Rome, condemned to death by crucifixion (Matt. 27:26), was declared innocent. Thus, the revolution that follows. (Tom Holland's book *Dominion* is very good on this point.)

The effect of having revealed the truth at the heart of human culture and its violent origins gives rise to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. "When our intellectuals, after the Second World War, and later with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, thought we were through with absolutes, they were simply wrong. Because the victimary principle of the defense of victims has become holy: it is the absolute" (*Evolution and Conversion*). Girard's remarks from nearly 20 years ago are even truer today as categorizations of victims and victimizers have grown exponentially. With financial, moral, and political capital on offer, the complexities of human existence have been brutally simplified, opening the way for rash, cowardly, and cruel campaigns of intimidation and cancellation. The fury of social media and the internet have emboldened those who successfully claim victim status to become the new victimizers.

For Girard, the Resurrection of Jesus sets off a revolution, the throes of which we witness to this day and will continue to witness until the end of history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He predicts that this evangelical truth will inevitably delegitimize every institution that relies on scapegoating to

preserve order and peace. This trend reveals Jesus’s urgent desire “to cast fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49) to be the Holy Spirit himself, the Paraclete. When the Church obeys the Spirit, then it follows Christ’s own declaration that he came to bring division, not peace (Luke 12:51), for the peace of this world is the product of scapegoating. The gospel divides and unleashes the possibility of violence because it undermines the moral credibility of the *Katéchon* while simultaneously recommending Christ as the only model to imitate. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives,” Jesus teaches at the Last Supper (John 14:27).

“History has a meaning and it is terrifying,” writes Girard in *Battling to the End*. We are living through the two-millennia process of the evangelical subversion of the sacred at the foundation of every human culture. Christianity effects apocalypse (revelation) in two senses: (1) it reveals the truth about humanity’s violent origins, and consequently (2) it confronts humanity with a crucial choice in light of this disclosure: either imitate Christ or risk annihilation at our own hands. This unavoidable predicament comes from a great inversion: As humanity grows in knowledge of mimesis, it loses control of its violence. Yet, Girard wonders if winning this internal and spiritual battle is more important than achieving a worldly victory: “We are thus more at war than ever, at a time when war itself no longer exists. We have to fight a violence that can no longer be controlled

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**CHRISTIANITY
CONFRONTS HUMANITY
WITH A CRUCIAL CHOICE
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DISCLOSURE: EITHER
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OUR OWN HANDS.**

”



Pentecost by Peter Paul Rubens (1619)

or mastered. Yet what if triumph were not the most important thing? What if the battle were worth more than the victory?” What does he mean?

Since scapegoating and the *Katéchon* have become less effective in this new Resurrection-effected economy, what is needed is the heroic attitude to battle to the end, which “alone can link violence and reconciliation, or more precisely, make tangible both the possibility of the end of the world *and* reconciliation among all members of the human race.” The condition for the latter entails the possibility of the former. From this ambivalence, we cannot escape, but in this situation there is a real chance of reconciliation.

Girard detects in all modern myths of progress an unwillingness to face their violence. Ideologies are not violent *per se*; people are. Ideologies are the updated version of myths, which “provide the grand narrative which covers up the victimary tendency. They are the mythical happy endings to our stories of persecution. If you look carefully, you will see that the conclusion of myths is always positive and optimistic.” In contrast to ideologies, “the Gospel does not provide a happy ending to our history. It simply shows us two options (which is exactly what ideologies never provide, freedom of choice): either we imitate Christ, giving up all our mimetic violence, or we run the risk of self-destruction.” The unhappy ending of the Gospel subverts the myth of progress, thereby freeing us from its inevitability and giving a genuine choice. Through the revelation of what is really going on behind the sacred, Christian demythologization has rendered sterile the scapegoat



MIMESIS DOES NOT DETERMINE THE OUTCOME OF INDIVIDUAL CHOICES. HUMAN BEINGS DO.



mechanism, scapegoating (as commonly understood), and the instruments of the *Katéchon* because violence no longer has the capacity to create anything: “It is finished. It is impotent. Thus, this is real anarchy.”

In the light of Jesus’s prophecies (Matt. 24, Mark 13:19–20), humanity must pass through the current ordeal, deprived of the guide markers of the sacred (which Girard always distinguishes from “the holy,” as in the Sacraments) because once-reliable explanations for human existence are exhausted, hearts have grown cold, and the violent contagion spreads globally. For this reason, we can understand Girard’s political atheism. Politics easily succumbs to mimetic rivalry, polarization, and violence because human beings equally excel at scapegoating.

Though Girard firmly maintains that mimesis is the implacable law of human behavior that inevitably spreads a contagion around a society, the same cannot be said for each person:

In communities, there are so many people that it would be statistically impossible for mimetic violence not to be present, but the individual isn’t bound hand-and-foot to mimetic desire. Jesus was not. To talk about freedom means to talk about man’s ability to resist the mimetic mechanism.

Mimesis does not determine the outcome of individual choices; human beings do. After the Resurrection and its demythologization of the cultural order (the sacred), people do have the free choice to succumb or to resist negative mimesis. Girard’s heroic and subversive vision dares to believe in each person’s capacity to make good choices due to the knowledge that Christ reveals and due to the power that the Spirit gives. In his article “How an Obscure Scholar

Is Shaping the Most Powerful Country on Earth,” Professor George Dunn summarizes well what Girard, the self-described “political atheist,” offers:

To be a political atheist is to refuse this worship [to the party, the movement, or the leader that has become an idol]. And that may be Dr. Girard’s final gift to our moment of frenzied polarization—not a theory that take sides, but a challenge to gain enough distance from the fray to see how mimetic it all is. **RL**

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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki: Forerunner of Classical Liberalism

by DAVID MENDOZA

IN HIS CLASSIC ESSAY “Sir Erskine May’s *Democracy in Europe*,” Lord Acton expounded on what he called the precursors to liberalism, saying they could be found in the “ponderous Latin” of Spanish Jesuit thinkers like Luis de Molina and Francisco Suárez. These precursors, while not liberals themselves, paved the way for liberty, and their ideas would inform later political theorists like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Future generations would continue to adopt and adapt these precursors’ ideas to develop such principles as freedom of religious conscience and the separation of powers.

While he did not make Acton’s list, one such precursor to classical liberalism was Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki (c. 1530–1607), a 16th-century Polish statesman, philosopher, and bishop who wrote a notable text titled *The Accomplished Senator*, published in 1568. Unfortunately, despite his influence, there is very little scholarship on the man. Yet Goślicki is noteworthy for his policies of religious tolerance during the biggest religious unsettlement of Europe’s history. Also noteworthy is the influence he had on subsequent generations. His readers included people

like William Shakespeare and the Italian Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine, who contributed to the literature on natural law and civil authority with texts like “On Laymen or Secular People.” Goślicki may even have had an impact on the American founding, as Thomas Jefferson also had a copy of his book in his library. He was also relied on heavily for the Polish constitution of 1791. Nevertheless, Goślicki remains a largely forgotten figure.

Goślicki was born around 1530, to a noble family. He received a classical education in Greek, Latin, history, and philosophy, immersing himself in writers like Plato and Aristotle, whom he would draw from heavily in his written work. He also undertook studies in law at the Universities of Padua and Bologna, after which he was recruited into government service and served as secretary to King Sigismund II Augustus (1520–1572) of Poland. He later served as minister for King Stefan Báthory and helped with the creation of the Warsaw Confederation in 1573, which

Tombstone of Wawrzyniec Grzymała Goślicki in the Póznani cathedral (photo by Mathiasrex, Maciej Szczepańczyk / CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons)

granted religious freedom to the nobility in the commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. It was during his service under Sigismund II that he wrote the remarkable text *The Accomplished Senator*.

Several signal events provided the context for this work. First was the Protestant Reformation, when Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformed were divided not only along ecclesiastical and confessional lines but political ones also. In this period of European history, if you were a peasant living in a particular jurisdiction, and your king or prince converted to Lutheranism, it meant you did, too. In Reformed regions, for instance, the “Erastian” theory of church and state was common, which taught that the civil authority had the right and responsibility to carry out the discipline of the church. While Poland remained officially Catholic, with Sigismund II as its emperor, what is often forgotten is that it had a significant Lutheran population at the time, as well as a substantial Eastern Orthodox presence as well.

Yet Poland stood out as a jurisdiction that did not exercise a heavy hand against religious dissenters from the Catholic faith and adopted significant policies of religious tolerance that other nations would follow much later. Sigismund II, for instance, passed legislation that permitted the use of the Augsburg Confession, the confessional standards of the Lutheran churches. The king is rightly credited with enforcing these policies, but it was Goślicki who provided the intellectual justification for them in his book.

To begin, Goślicki’s *The Accomplished Senator* is really a book about governing well. He discusses the importance of character for statesmen and the need to cultivate the cardinal virtues, and likewise orient the society toward virtuous living. His political philosophy was rooted in a robust Christian anthropology, and his theology of the human person in the *Imago Dei*, arguing that every human being was created with inherent dignity, which entailed mankind’s capacity to reason. Drawing on Plato’s likening of the city to the soul, Goślicki argued that God had created man as a perfect image “of the Body Politick” and that the political body had three principal parts: the head, the heart, and the belly. Thus, citizens could cultivate virtue by way of good government, and preferably through the leadership of a good senator. Goślicki also believed that cultivating these virtues was essential in what he called the “Art of Government,” which he considered to be the most excellent “branch of learning.”

Goślicki thought of good governance as an application of the ancients, that there was wisdom to be drawn from the Greek and Roman projects of democracy and republican government. He was also not afraid to ask “What is the good life?” and drew heavily upon the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing or the highest good) in providing an answer. *Eudaimonia* served as the end for which senators were to govern; Goślicki then drew on writers like Cicero for how statesmen were to achieve this end.

Branching out from this classical starting point, Goślicki offered some helpful arguments for the importance of a senate within a monarchy. For him, a senate was necessary because it provided a mediator between the king and the people. The king, according to Goślicki, was too far removed from his subjects and lacked the more intimate knowledge necessary to govern and meet the needs of the populace properly. A senator, however, was close enough to the people such that he could learn their ways of life and communicate this in the language or custom of the king. One immediately thinks of the American Founders and their desire for a Congress that had one chamber that was close to the people and a higher chamber to restrain their whims, or even of the parliamentary system in England before that. It is also worth mentioning that Goślicki’s book was translated and published in an English edition as early as 1733.

Goślicki’s intellectual contributions and political career prove him to be an important precursor to the classical liberal tradition. His emphases on the separation of powers, of liberty of conscience, all with the human person at the center of his project, culminated in his signing of the Warsaw Confederation in 1573, which embedded into law freedom of religious conscience and political equality and served as documentary confirmation of his lifelong concern for what could be called “ordered liberty.” He can very well be considered a Scholastic theologian in a strain similar to that of Robert Bellarmine, who adapted these ideas to his own, later political context as part of the broader project of liberty to come. Overall, students of the history of liberty should read the works of Goślicki as a theologian and statesman engaged in the great conversation that continues to this day. **RL**

David Mendoza is an educator and writer in California and an alumnus of the Emerging Leaders Program at the Acton Institute. He holds an M.A. in historical theology from Westminster Seminary California.

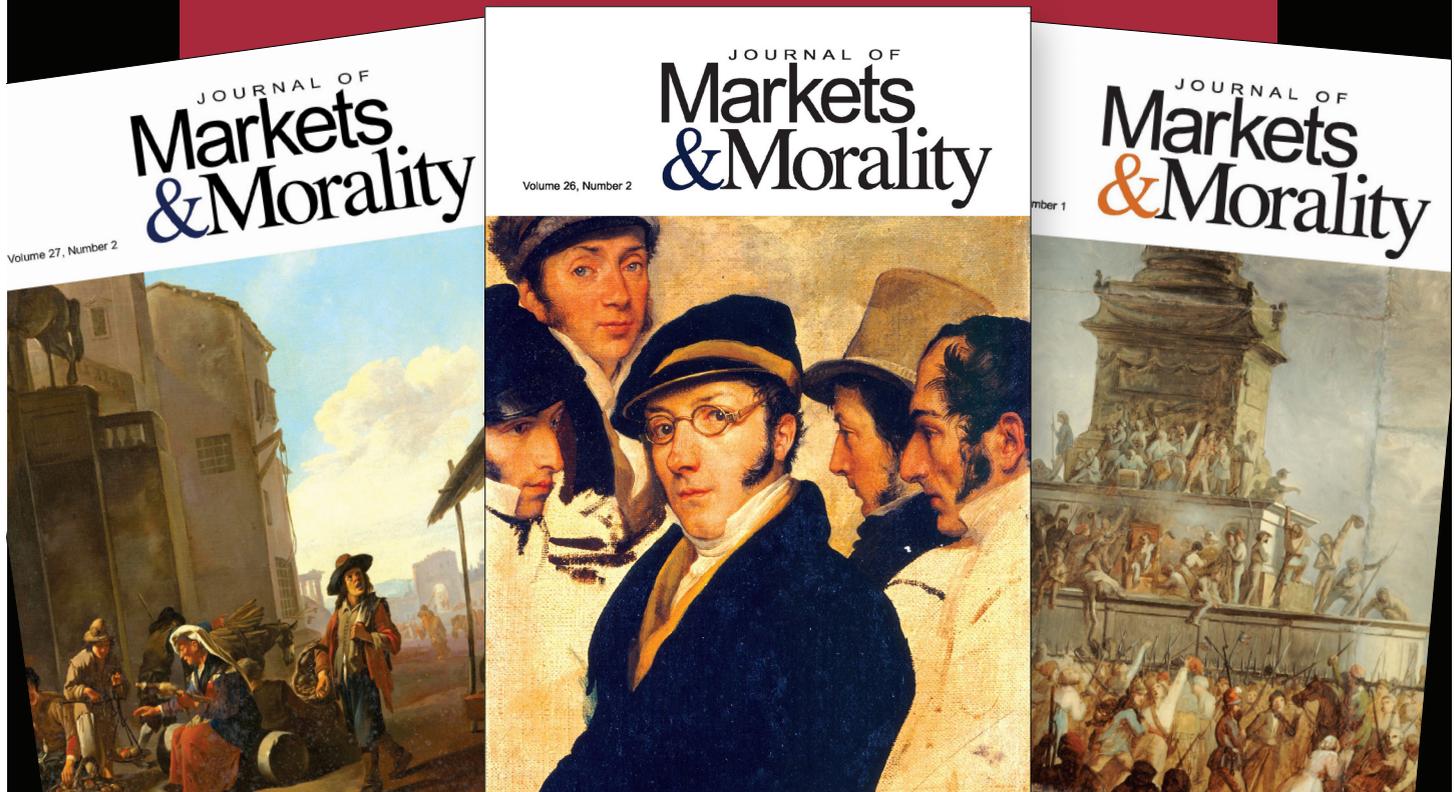
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The Great Seal design proposed by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, as illustrated by Benson J. Lossing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1856

The Holy Scriptures and America's Presidents

For many today, a Bible in the hands of a president is little more than a prop for a photo-op. But history shows that the Scriptures once propped up a nation's self-definition and provided inspiration even for presidents of a skeptical bent.

by MARK DAVID HALL

IN THE SUMMER OF 2024, Louisiana passed a law requiring posters of the Ten Commandments be displayed in public school classrooms. Days after Louisiana Governor Jeff Landry signed the bill into law, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the Freedom from Religion Foundation filed suit claiming the law violated both the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the U.S. Constitution. A federal district court judge and a panel of Fifth Circuit judges agreed. The case, and similar cases from Arkansas and Texas, are still being litigated.

The loud, persistent, and hyperbolic objections to merely displaying the Ten Commandments in public schools obscures the reality that America is a country profoundly influenced by the Bible. Even ardent secularists recognize the Bible's impact in the early colonies, and although too many scholars have denied its influence on America's founders, recent books such as Daniel L. Dreisbach's *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* have demonstrated that the Holy Scriptures were the most important book in this era.

A central contribution of Carl J. Richard's *So Help Us, God: American Presidents and the Bible* is to show that the Bible had profound influence on most

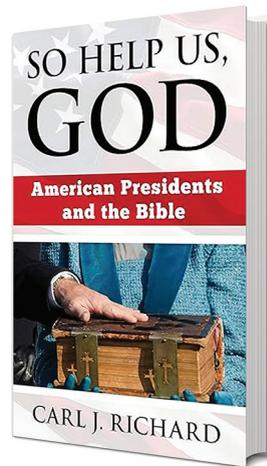
American presidents from the founding era to at least the early 21st century. Even the presidents who questioned whether the Bible was the uniquely inspired Word of God were familiar with it and often incorporated it into their speeches and correspondence.

Before proceeding, two qualifications are in order. First, Richard recognizes that some presidents rejected orthodox Christianity and the divine inspiration of the Bible. He never attempts to make presidents seem more orthodox or pious than they were. Second, he understands that some public statements by presidents were written by members of their staff. Yet the fact that they retained scriptural references says something about America's political culture. And many examples that Richard includes come from private correspondence, diary entries, or conversations not intended for public consumption.

Richard begins by considering how presidents came to know the Bible. The most important influences were “pious grandparents, parents, siblings and wives” followed closely by participation in church services. But particularly relevant in light of recent disputes about the Ten Commandments is the fact that, from the founding era through the 1960s, the Bible played a central role in American education—both private and public. Indeed, college entrance exams in the 18th and 19th centuries often required proof that the applicant had the ability to read the New Testament *in Greek*. To take just two examples, in 1815 James K. Polk was required to translate the Gospel of John from Greek to English to be admitted to the University of North Carolina. Five years later, Franklin Pierce had to prove he could translate the Greek New Testament to be admitted to Bowdoin.

Richard makes a persuasive case that many “presidents have studied the Bible throughout their lives.” Even the heterodox Thomas Jefferson spent a great deal of time studying the Bible in multiple languages, including biblical Greek. Surprisingly, at least to this reader, in his retirement Andrew Jackson read a chapter of the Bible to his family at the end of each day and, on his deathbed, encouraged those present to “keep holy the Sabbath day and read the New Testament.” Jimmy Carter regularly read the Holy Scriptures with his wife, even reading “through the entire Bible several times in Spanish.”

The Bible has often been referenced in the political rhetoric of American presidents, especially when they needed heroes and villains. Jesus Christ has



*So Help Us,
God: American
Presidents
and the Bible*

By Carl J. Richard
(Rowman &
Littlefield, 2025)

often been held up as a role model. In Woodrow Wilson's words, he offered “the only perfect example of service for love's sake.” More than a century later, President Obama proclaimed that “through a life of humility and ultimate sacrifice, a life guided by faith and kindness towards others, Christ assumed a mighty voice, teaching us lessons of compassion and charity that have lasted more than two millennia.”

The Bible is replete with heroes. Among the many regularly referenced by presidents are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Solomon, Samuel, Isaiah, the Samaritan woman, and the Good Samaritan. Notably, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin would have featured Moses on the national seal.

Historically, Christians have believed in an omniscient and omnipotent God who intervenes in the affairs of men and nations to bring about His will. This intervention is often referred to as “Providence,” a doctrine that can provide hope and comfort in good times and bad. George Washington repeatedly referenced God's Providence, including in this 1755 letter to his brother, penned during the French and Indian War:

As I have heard, since my arrival at this place, a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that I have not, as yet, composed the latter.—But, by the All-powerful Dispensation of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four Bullets through my Coat, and two horses shot under me; yet escaped unhurt, altho[ugh] Death was leveling my Companions on every side me!

It is common to attribute good things to God's Providence, but Richard gives multiple examples of presidents recognizing that sorrows come from God as well. For instance, after the Second Battle of Bull Run, President Lincoln, in "notes of private meditation, intended for his eyes only," observed:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be, wrong. God cannot be *for* and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

If one believes in a God who is active in the affairs of men and nations, it is only reasonable to also believe in the efficacy of prayer. Most presidents before, during, and after they were in office have professed belief in prayer. For many, the longer they were in office, the more they prayed. Then-candidate Jimmy Carter observed in 1976 that "I spent more time on my knees the four years I was governor in the seclusion of a little private room off the governor's office than I did in all the rest of my life put together."

Presidents pray privately and with others, and with some regularity they issue calls for prayer, encouraging citizens throughout the nation to pray on a particular day. A few (for example, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson) did not because they believed such calls violated the First and/or Tenth Amendments. James Madison issued four calls while he was president, although he later wrote in a private document that he believed such calls to be unconstitutional.

In February of 2024, *Politico* reporter Heidi Przybyla mocked Americans who believe rights "don't come from Congress, they don't come from the Supreme Court, they come from God." In September of 2025, Virginia Senator Tim Caine doubled down

on this idea, observing that the idea that rights come from the Creator is "what the Iranian government believes." They would undoubtedly be troubled by the Declaration of Independence, drafted by future President Thomas Jefferson, which proclaims: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

From the founding era to the present day, Democratic and Republican presidents alike have declared that rights come from God. Former President Herbert Hoover, for instance, observed that classical liberalism is based on the tenet that "Liberty is an endowment from the Creator of every individual man and woman upon which no power, whether economic or political, can encroach, and that not even the government may deny." President Truman even more specifically connected rights to the Holy Scriptures: "The fundamental basis of our Bill of Rights comes from the teachings which we get from Exodus and St. Matthew, from Isaiah and St. Paul."

The Scriptures portray Israel as a nation chosen by God to play a role in bringing about His will on earth. Presidents have found the idea to be quite attractive, especially as applied to the United States. In his 1790 letter to the Hebrew Synagogue in Savannah, Georgia, President Washington wrote:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

Most, perhaps all, presidents have agreed, often casting America as God's agent for advancing liberty and equality around the globe. Presidents routinely attributed positive developments to God's blessing His chosen nation, but also understood tragic events to be God's punishment for the nation not living up to its mission. Most famously, President Lincoln understood the Civil War as punishment for both the North's and the South's complicity in the sins of slavery.

In crafting a national government, the Founders drew from the “new science of politics” to create a constitutional order characterized by the separation of powers and checks and balances. But virtually all of them also believed that republican government required a moral citizenry, and that religion was necessary for morality. Most famously, President Washington, in his 1796 “Farewell Address,” observed that:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Note that Washington goes so far as to suggest that anyone who subverts either religion or morality is unpatriotic. Toward the end of the paragraph, he acknowledged that it may be possible that someone with a “refined education” could be virtuous without being religious, but at the national level he clearly believed that religion is necessary to generate the virtues needed to make republican government possible. Washington’s assessment has been echoed by presidents from the 18th through the 21st centuries.

As noted above, Richard acknowledges that some presidents may reference Christianity and the Bible even though they privately reject aspects of orthodox Christianity or divine revelation. His penultimate chapter acknowledges that both John Adams and John Quincy Adams valued the Bible but embraced heretical views and questioned the inerrancy of Scripture. Similarly, Rutherford B. Hayes privately admitted that he rejected “most of the notion...orthodox people have of the divinity

of the Bible,” and as a student at Whittier College Richard Nixon wrote that “my education has taught me that the Bible, like all other books, is the work of man and consequently has man-made mistakes.” Jefferson was “perhaps the most skeptical president concerning the Bible” even as he valued the moral teachings of Jesus.

So *Help Us, God* provides an excellent overview of how presidents have been influenced by the Bible and used it in their private and public communications. That presidents with unorthodox views or who questioned the Bible’s inerrancy kept their views private tells us much about American political culture from the founding era to the present day. This review has described only a tiny percentage of the thousands of examples that Richard provides to support each of his claims. The Bible has always played a central role in American politics—at least until very recently.

Richard’s book was published in 2025, but he gives literally no examples of Presidents Biden or Trump using the Bible in their political rhetoric. He notes that the former regularly attends Mass but says virtually nothing about the latter’s spiritual practices (or lack thereof). These recent presidents may well reflect the reality that fewer and fewer Americans embrace Christianity. In 2007, 16% of Americans were religiously unaffiliated; in 2023, 28% described themselves as such.

It is also the case that fewer Americans believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. In the late 1970s, 12% of Americans described the Bible as “fables, history, and moral precepts recorded by man,” whereas 29% described it as such in 2022. Americans today are a less religious and a less biblically centered people than they were in the past. This may help explain the increased polarization that marks contemporary politics. It may well be the case that President Washington was correct when he observed that “of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” **RL**

Mark David Hall is a professor in Regent University’s Robertson School of Government and project director of Religious Liberty in the States. His most recent book is Who’s Afraid of Christian Nationalism?: Why Christian Nationalism Is Not a Threat to American Democracy or the Church.



A page from a reproduction of al-Jahiz's Kitāb al-Hayawān depicting an ostrich / Wikimedia Commons

The Lost Empiricism of al-Jahiz

Our “post-truth” Western world of tribalism, conspiracy, and irrationalism needs to retrieve its tradition of fact-based reasoning. One rich resource just may be the Golden Age of Islamic civilization.

by MUSTAFA AKYOL

“Who but an ignoramus would dispute observation?”
—*al-Jahiz*

MODERN-DAY MUSLIMS OFTEN nostalgically remember their Golden Age, spanning from the eighth to the 13th centuries, when Islamic civilization led the world in science, technology, philosophy, medicine, and various other branches of human flourishing. One thing they may not always note, however, is that this premodern enlightenment was enabled by the cosmopolitanism of the early Islamic civilization, where Muslims not only ruled over many diverse communities—from Christians to Jews, from Zoroastrians to Hindus—but also engaged intellectually with their rich traditions. Among the latter was the Greek philosophical heritage preserved by

Nestorian churches, which helped raise Islam’s own philosophers.

One of the most interesting minds from this Golden Age was the prolific polymath Abu ‘Uthman ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 868/869), known simply as al-Jahiz, or “the goggle-eyed,” a nickname given to him due to his protruding eyes. Of Ethiopian descent, he lived and flourished in Basra and Baghdad, the two intellectual capitals of the Abbasid Caliphate. Partly thanks to the patronage of caliphs—including Caliph al-Ma‘mun (r. 813–833), a lover of philosophy who reportedly saw Aristotle in a dream—al-Jahiz produced almost 200 manuscripts on a wide range of topics, from theology to zoology, linguistics to politics. His masterpiece is *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, or “Book of Animals,” an extensive encyclopedia in seven volumes that drew on

Aristotle's works on zoology while featuring beautiful illustrations. Some modern scholars argue that in this book al-Jahiz also hinted at such "evolutionary" ideas as a struggle for existence and natural selection that anticipated the theories of Charles Darwin—though in an unmistakably theistic framework.

Those interested in free markets and limited governments may also be intrigued by al-Jahiz's short essay titled, "In Praise of Tradesmen and Disparagement of Officialdom," as it was translated by Charles Pellat in his 1969 book, *The Life and Works of Jahiz*. Here al-Jahiz reflects on the commercial culture of the early centuries of Islam by praising tradesmen as "always the most scrupulous, the happiest and the most secure of men" because "their means of livelihood subjects them to no humiliation." Conversely, he adds,

It is quite otherwise with men close to the government and in its service. They wear the mantle of servility and the badge of flattery. Their hearts are filled [with awe] of their superiors. Fear dwells in them, servility never leaves them.

Now, if any of this sounds interesting, there is more good news: A new book by Hussein Ali Abdulsater, an associate professor of Arabic Culture and Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, explores al-Jahiz's worldview more deeply than any other available work: *Al-Jāhīz and Religious Knowledge: A Forgotten Islamic Rationalism*. The book is quite academic in tone, which may not be easily grasped by every lay reader, but for those interested in the nuances of religious theology and philosophy, it offers remarkable insights.

Abdulsater begins by explaining why al-Jahiz was a unique thinker. As is well known, he was associated with the Mu'tazilites, the theological school in early Islam often described as "the rationalists" that was at odds with strict "textualists." The Mu'tazilites, for example, argued that the ethical values of right and wrong precede revelation and are rationally discernible by every human being. They, in other words, strongly believed in what Christians would call "natural law." They also believed in laws of nature, affirming that God had given certain inherent properties to His creation, rather than re-creating them at every instant without any causal link—as the Ash'arites, the rival theological school that ultimately won

over the Mu'tazilites, argued with their doctrine of "occasionalism."

As a side note, Abdulsater shares a political insight about this Ash'arite victory over Mu'tazilism, which I also probed in my 2021 book, *Reopening Muslim Minds*. He writes: "This was partly owing to the origins of Mu'tazilism as a religiously motivated opposition, which made it ideologically less malleable to government will, given the Mu'tazilis' pride in the logical impeccability of their moralistic thinking."

Going back to al-Jahiz, there may be nothing new in reiterating his adherence to Mu'tazilite theology, but what *is* innovative in Abdulsater's book is how the author demonstrates that there were two distinct epistemological trends within Mu'tazilism, which can be defined as pure rationalism, which reduced rationality to the process of reasoning itself, and empiricism, which gave more weight to sensory experience and observation. (It is a distinction that reminds one of the rationalists versus empiricists in Western thought: the former dominant in the French tradition, the latter in the Anglo-Saxon one.)

Al-Jahiz is a remarkable figure because he was the lodestar of the empiricists (whom Abdulsater also calls "epistemists"). "Though Jāhīz's Mu'tazili loyalties were unwavering," the author explains,

his position represents a clear departure from those of other theologians and betrays a radically different sensibility....[It] combines theological discussions with a keen interest in natural science, intimate experience of society, piercing insight into psychology, superb command of Arabic lore and broad awareness of foreign traditions towards the goal of reconciling a profound understanding of the natural world with a proper belief in the message of Islam. This reconciliation would encapsulate his understanding of the role of reason in religious matters; it would be *his* Islamic rationalism.

For example, Mu'tazilites firmly believed that the Islamic faith is rationally justifiable, as they tried to demonstrate with an elaborate theology; this was in opposition to the textualists, some of whom found all theology as a useless, if not heretical, innovation. So Mu'tazilites took great pains to prove the existence of God, the truth of the Qur'an, and the prophethood of Muhammad, along with other doctrines of Islam. But this intellectual sophistication came with a rigidity: Since Islam is rationally justifiable, most Mu'tazilites believed, every thinking person should arrive at its

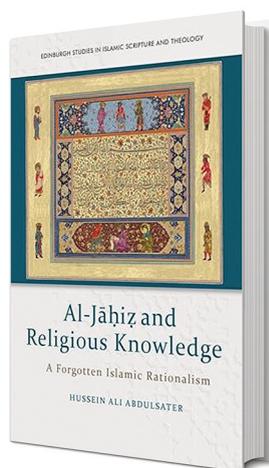
truths through speculative reasoning. Those who knowingly rejected it were not to be coerced into belief on this earth, but their fate in the afterlife looked grim, as they would face eternal punishment for willful disbelief.

Al-Jahiz, however, departed from such strict reasoning and did something quite empirical: He investigated society. He observed that most people simply followed the sects and religions into which were they born. “Look at how most people in Basra prefer ‘Uthmān, how most Kufans prefer ‘Alī, and how most Syrians follow the cult of the Umayyads,” he wrote, pointing out the sectarian divisions among the Muslims of his time. He then extended this observation to religious divisions:

If it were a matter of rational thinking and analysis...how come the children of Jews choose Judaism, the children of Christians Christianity, and the children of Zoroastrians Zoroastrianism? Therefore, it is clear that the religions of humankind are embraced through simple imitation, not through rational investigation, and that imitation itself can lead to truth or error in equal measure.

So Al-Jahiz realized that “however intelligent people might be, they could not transcend the intellectual horizons of their historical eras.” For the same reason, “he did not judge them for their failure to do so.” Abdulsater draws a parallel between al-Jahiz and Mark Twain, who, some 10 centuries later, would also observe that people’s religious or political affiliations often came from “association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination.”

The empiricism of al-Jahiz was also evident in his fact-based views on nature, which were not shared by all his contemporaries. We see this in a dialogue Abdulsater reports between al-Jahiz and his contemporary al-Makki, who apparently was a textualist keen on hadiths—sayings attributed to the prophet, despite uncertainties about their authenticity. It took place in Wasit, a city notorious for its many flies. Here, by simply relying on a hadith, al-Makki confidently told al-Jahiz, “Lifespan of a fly is a mere forty days.” But al-Jahiz objected, saying that they had been living in the city for months and yet had not seen a single dead fly. When al-Makki responded by speculating that the flies must be going to wastelands to die, al-Jahiz said he had never observed that either.



Al-Jāhiz and Religious Knowledge: A Forgotten Islamic Rationalism

By Hussein Ali Abdulsater

(Edinburgh University Press, 2025)

In other words, al-Jahiz believed that no hadith, no matter how well attested it seemed to be, “should outweigh direct observation.” He emphatically declared that “observation compels the observer” (*qahar al-‘iyān ahlāh*) and rejected every viewpoint that is disproved by observation as “the most egregious blunder and the most ridiculous conviction.”

In short, al-Jahiz was “innocent of Maimonides’ charge that religious intellectuals ‘ignore the existing nature of things,’” as Abdulsater skillfully demonstrates in his book.

This is why al-Jahiz deserves to be remembered and studied today: The systematic study of “the existing nature of things” went into a long decline in Islam after its Golden Age; consequently, Muslims have lost much of their early cosmopolitanism, curiosity, and creativity.

It should be noted that empiricism has been declining in the West of late, too, with the rise of “post-truth” ideologies on the left and the right, and the replacement of the age of reason with an age of emotion, conspiracism, and tribalism. Against these troubling dynamics, which all seem to threaten human liberty and flourishing, we need to revive all sources of wisdom available to us. And one of them is al-Jahiz, this eccentric Muslim polymath from the ninth century, whose combination of piety and curiosity shows how one can be both a good believer and a good student of society and nature. ■

Mustafa Akyol is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, an affiliate scholar at the Acton Institute, and the author of The Islamic Moses: How the Prophet Inspired Jews and Muslims to Flourish Together and Change the World (2024).



Orthodox Social Thought and the Public Square

Eastern Orthodoxy is often thought of as inward-looking and rarely engaged in public policy debates. Yet its rich history and sacramental theology have much to offer in seeking the common good.

by ANNE BRADLEY

IN HIS NEW BOOK, *The Kingdom of God and the Common Good: Orthodox Christian Social Thought*, Dylan Pahman, research fellow at the Acton Institute and executive editor of the *Journal of Markets and Morality*, presents a groundbreaking study of Orthodox social thought, highlighting commonalities with and differences from other Christian denominations in this area. The book offers a clear, well-researched guide to church history, tracing the practice of Orthodox social teaching over millennia, gleaning insights along the way from the law, the prophets, wisdom literature, and the Gospels, always with an Orthodox emphasis on reading scripture not alone but with the church.

Most interestingly, *Orthodox Christian Social Thought* integrates Orthodox social thought with political economy, emphasizing not just economic efficiency but also virtuous institutions that foster neighborly love and productive service in God's Kingdom. In so doing, Pahman explores a historical theology of care for the poor, Christian witness, the role of work and innovation, and biblical views of the common good, covering commercial, political, and social relations and their application within the Orthodox tradition more specifically.

In Orthodox social thought, it is the church that binds the world and the Kingdom of God, and

Orthodox Christians have a long history of confronting both poverty *and* economic growth and the riches it affords, political oppression, exile, and religious wars. In so doing, Orthodox social thought has had to wrestle with public welfare, productive and unproductive labor, price fluctuations, interest, money lending, and population growth.

Pahman’s work presents this history clearly, showing how the church fathers and scripture-based teachings help us learn from the past and shape Orthodox social thought in the present, offering a framework for navigating political and economic life without being too precisely prescriptive. We learn from Christian Rome and Byzantium about justice and mercy toward the poor; from the so-called Dark Ages about the entrepreneurial spirit of the monasteries; and the true nature of *symphonia*, that ideal harmony between church and empire, and what happens when that is corrupted. Throughout we find bright lights of innovation, ascetic witness, and kenotic love, especially in medieval Rus’.

All this is deeply rooted in liturgical theology, where the worship of the church shaped its vision of society and of human dignity, and continues to do so today, beginning with the most pivotal event in human history: the Incarnation.

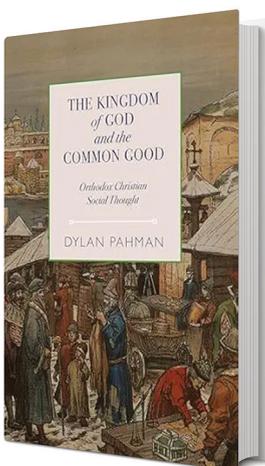
There is a saying that history is the conscience of the social sciences. Building on this insight, Pahman transitions from a historical survey of theology to an analysis of political economy. You might wonder what economics has to do with, say, the creeds? More than you might think. Man lives neither by spiritual nor by physical bread alone.

Pahman’s treatment of political economy begins with the great economist Lionel Robbins, who offers

this definition: “Economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses.” Economics is necessary because we live in a world of material scarcity and are limited by our fallen nature. Moreover, economics is a *social* science, and we are social, made in the image and likeness of a triune God. We have infinite dignity, yet we are also finite and broken. As such, we respond to incentives, and so institutions and rules of the game matter.

In other words, political economy goes beyond technical cost benefit analysis: We must also understand the norms that emerge from culture: our habits, government, laws, and religious commitments. Again, institutions matter, and they govern (with a small g) our behavior. Consequently, Orthodox social thought can inform how we think about institutions and whether they advance or detract from the common good in the light of the gospel. In fact, Pahman begins his book with a question: “If the Kingdom of God is truly at hand, what does it mean to live as a subject of that Kingdom?” The literature is vast on the theological and political differences among Christians attempting to provide an answer. Yet getting this right is essential, and for Pahman it’s a matter of attaining true social justice.

So what is the practical application of Orthodox social thought in fostering the common good? Economists are quick to point out that you should be careful what you agitate for—you might get it. Being ethically minded about policy isn’t enough; we cannot merely *intend* to do good; we must generate good outcomes. This is true for two important reasons: policy is about people and so should first do no harm, and scarcity demands that we direct our limited resources in the most productive manner possible.



The Kingdom of God and the Common Good: Orthodox Christian Social Thought

By Dylan Pahman
(Ancient Faith Publishing, 2025)

“
IN ORTHODOX SOCIAL THOUGHT, IT IS THE CHURCH THAT BINDS THE WORLD AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD.
”

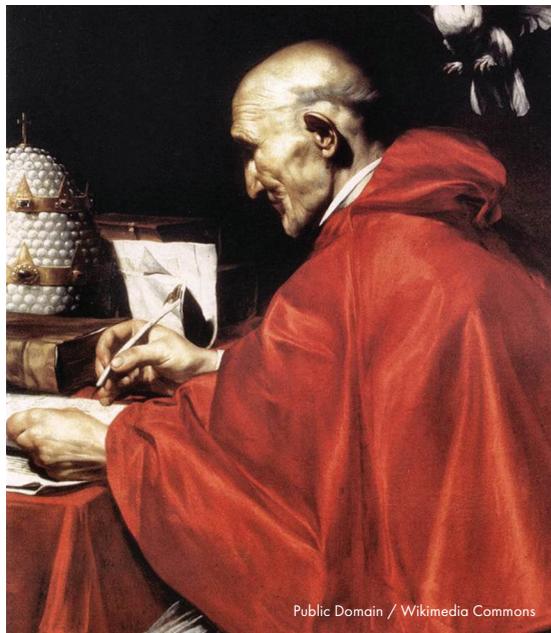


Mises Institute / CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

F.A. Hayek (1899–1992)

In attempting his thoroughly Orthodox answer to the question of living as subjects of God’s Kingdom, Pahman takes us on a star-studded journey through the history of political economy: from the Late Scholastics and the moral philosopher-turned-father of modern economics Adam Smith to John Maynard Keynes, Wilhelm Röpke, Kenneth Boulding, and F.A. Hayek. For many, the social science of economics means socialism. But we can’t properly evaluate socialism as an economic system without addressing ethics in addition to efficacy of central planning. Virtue must always ground our approach to the economy, with a focus on human dignity. After all, there were Christian socialists who believed that modern industrial progress alienated the working class, which needed government protection through state economic planning. But does socialism understand what it means to be fully human?

O *rthodox Christian Social Thought* highlights commonalities with Catholics and the Reformed Protestant traditions. For example, Pahman begins his journey into a holistic Orthodox social thought in the book of Genesis, as do these other traditions. A properly understood human anthropology—where did we come from and what is our true end?—is essential to understanding all forms of social formation. Orthodoxy also



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Saint Gregory the Great by José de Ribera (c. 1614)

recognizes that the focus when speaking of “the common good” should always be on Jesus and his life. Despite our status as exiles, strangers in a strange land, we are still called to seek the good of the city (Jeremiah 29:7) in community.

Unlike some individualistic approaches to biblical theology, the Orthodox tradition calls for reading scripture with the church, not alone or outside it. This is how best to understand God’s design and desire for His Kingdom, as well as our role in constructing “pre-views” of this Kingdom here and now. In reading the church fathers on wealth and poverty we learn that, while wealth is not evil, the human heart can be. We should reject a false dualism that pits wealth against poverty, but must always be wary of what riches can do to our hearts. Pahman argues that while wealth can help us “see” the Kingdom, it can also blind us, so discussions of wealth and commerce must always be approached with a Christ-centered heart. Pahman notes that we live in the richest time in human history, making a proper theology of wealth and poverty more critical than ever.

While there are commonalities with other Christian traditions in addressing economics, Pahman elaborates on four key Orthodox emphases that stand out in its social teaching. These include asceticism, salvific grace, the relationship between church and state, and the concepts of *kenoticism* and *sobornost*.

Asceticism may not seem like a particularly social practice, yet for the Orthodox it's a means of fostering true communion with God, and thus contributing to the common good. Spiritual disciplines like almsgiving, fasting, praying, confession, silence, and, for some, even celibacy are not just personal but inherently social. For example, fasting means that you can offer the food you would have eaten to the hungry. The early church described in the book of Acts banded together to share all property in common to care for one another. This is not a prohibition of private property but an act of love and sacrifice for the sake of Christ that allows us to bear witness to His love in the world.

What may prove startling to, say, Protestant readers is how Orthodox teaching blurs the distinction between common grace and particular grace. Pahman argues that all grace is potentially salvific and, to some extent, sacramental because it reveals God to us and provides an example of how we can and should extend grace to others. It is a model for neighborly love. Pahman argues that the unique Orthodox contribution lies in demonstrating how we are more than stewards of God's earthly gifts but also "priests" in the world.

Pahman's historical approach shows how often the earliest Christians were exiles or minorities and had to figure out how to care for one another under harsh conditions. Finally, it was St. Gregory, a monk who became pope in 590, who paved the way for the church in pursuing its distinct missional role through extensive social work. He understood this work as that of "service rather than power," both in light of the Incarnation and Christians' often powerlessness in the face of hostile empires.

On the flip side, distortions of *symphonia*, or the harmony between the church and the civil realm, result when church and state are too intertwined. The church makes its unique and essential contributions to the common good when it is free from political vassalage. Thus, religious freedom is essential. In fact, political privilege can be dangerous, creating "winners" and "losers," especially in the economy. Natural law provides a model for civil law adjudicated by the government and informed by justice without falling into radical religious nationalism.

A brilliant example of Orthodox social teaching on church-state relations is the humanism that arose within the Byzantine Empire (4th–15th centuries) at a time when the church was free to articulate its missional role in society and worked to shape the moral

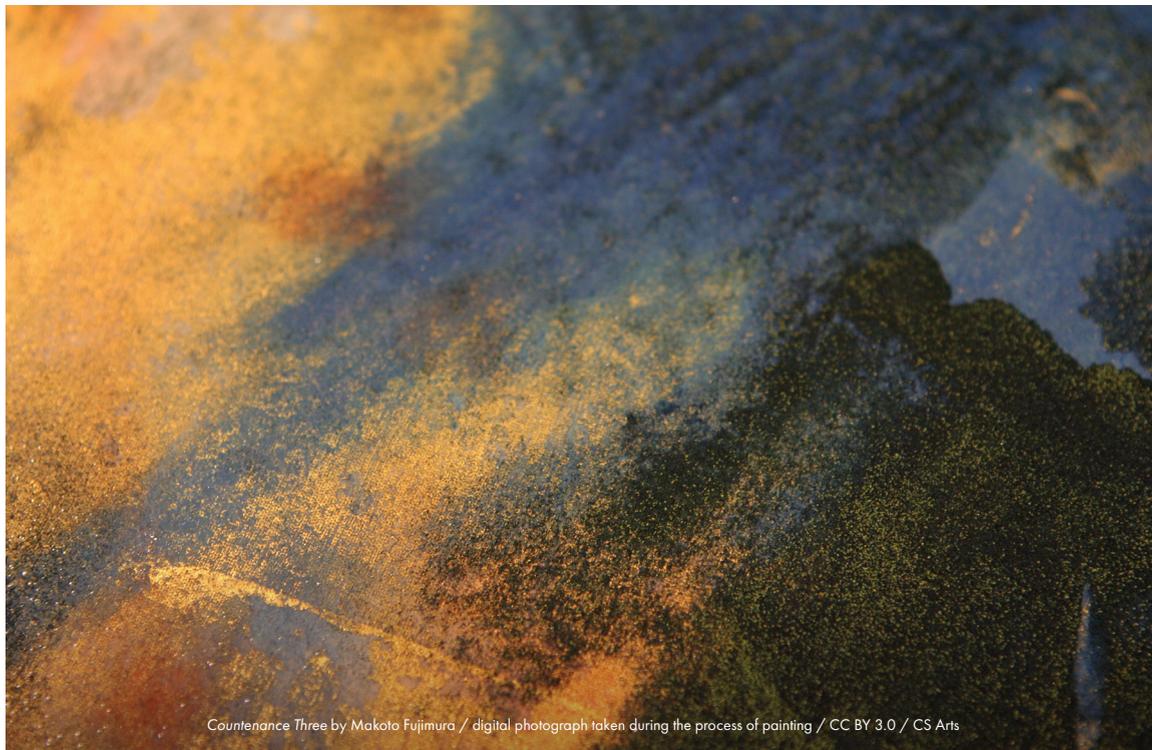
foundations of public life. Rooted in the doctrine of the Incarnation, orthodoxy views culture as capable of sanctification, something that can be transformed and offered to God rather than merely rejected as "worldly."

Lastly, Orthodox social thought provides two concepts for how to live in community. *Kenoticism* means identifying oneself with the lowest members of society, and in doing so caring for the less fortunate in a relational manner. *Sobornost* is a concept that recognizes the spiritual unity of all and urges harmony and communion. We are not merely individuals but exist as one in the Body of Christ. Both kenoticism and sobornost offer an egalitarian perspective on the social order and neighborly love. The church exists "for the life of the world" (John 6:51) as a sacramental presence. Pahman urges us to consider the "cosmic weight of the Incarnation as 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:18)."

The *Kingdom of God and the Common Good* fills an essential gap in the literature on Christian social teaching, providing a rich and accessible historical account of 2,000 years of reflection on the role of the church in the world. While Orthodox social thought has long existed and been practiced, it has long been undertheorized. No longer. Pahman's survey of political economy from an Eastern perspective provides an excellent primer from which any Christian can benefit.

Today's economies and governments look vastly different than those experienced by the early Christians. Understanding the church's response to wealth and poverty today means also understanding how it has responded in the past and discerning its unifying, transcendent wholeness in meeting modern needs. As Pahman reminds us, the Kingdom of God is "within us" (Luke 17:21), "at hand" (Matthew 3:2), and yet to come (Matthew 6:10). He even suggests that urban monasteries could enhance our ascetic service and witness. Moreover, we need a moral political economy grounded in the common good for God's glory, and this book offers that for any Christian. Pahman's work invites all Christians to reconsider how theology, economics, and social life converge in the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. **RL**

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Countenance Three by Makoto Fujimura / digital photograph taken during the process of painting / CC BY 3.0 / CS Arts

Modern Christian Art as Ancient Way of Seeing

Truth, beauty, and reality itself are eluding us. We need to slow down and look again. A uniquely Japanese—and Christian—form of art can help.

by BRIAN A. SMITH

MAKOTO FUJIMURA OCCUPIES a peculiar role in modern art. He's a distinctively Christian painter amid a sea of skeptics and opponents of the faith. Many artists talk a great deal about diversity and inclusion but in practice live in monocultural and ideological bubbles. Educated in Japan and the United States but not fully a part of either culture, Fujimura uses historic Japanese techniques in his work and presents a fusion of East and West that attempts to seek beauty and truth once again through art. Crucially, he also stands apart from most artists in his commitment to practicing a kind of "slow art" in the traditional Japanese (*Nihonga*) form while writing and speaking prolifically.

Art Is: A Journey into Light extends the ideas Fujimura developed in two previous books, *Culture Care* and *Art + Faith*. Where the former offers a manifesto of sorts for how Christians should approach work in the culture and the latter develops a theology of making, this latest book offers reflections on the meaning and purpose of art qua art, which Fujimura develops for the reader while leading them on a tour of his own artistic tools and techniques.

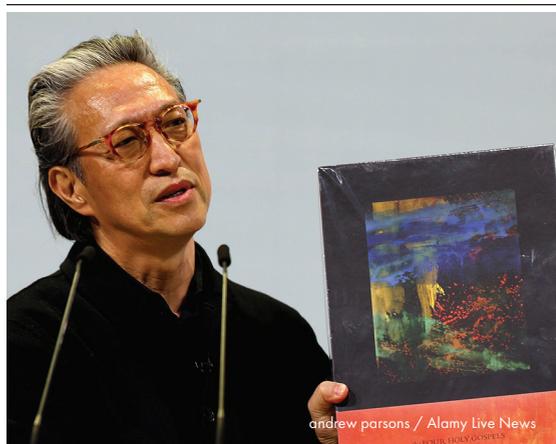
The result is a phenomenological exploration of art, offering a dizzying array of definitions for the subject. Art is variously described as "the quest of what 'Life is'" and as "awareness...being made aware of our world, full of wonderment and sorrows." Art

“meanders to inaugurate the new,” it “is a path to receive and cultivate the gift (*charisma*) of life,” and “a liturgy of peace.” Fujimura offers each of these observations as partial statements of art’s purpose. He might call them refractions of the whole. His definitions share a steadfast opposition to the nihilistic and disintegrating views of art that have become standard in the world of high culture.

By contrast, Fujimura invites us into the possibility that art—driven by perspective as it is—can point us toward an objective reality. He rejects romantic notions of art that reduce it to a vehicle for “mere self-expression” or “a device for finding oneself.” As beings created in God’s image, when we in turn create art we reflect something of the truly real in our own creations. In this way, our attempts to craft or make allow us to see or understand aspects of our world that might otherwise be inaccessible to us in our ordinary, busy lives.

Fujimura tells those viewing his paintings that it takes about 10 minutes of quiet reflection to really *see*. No surprise, then, that he writes that “art creates a pause to rethink, helping us to slow down, reflect on what we see and hear.” That does not mean that art is all about cultivating seriousness. Although art points us to serious matters, it “is closely related to a child’s experience of play. Play is gratuitous and free, yet much of play involves learning to find freedom within boundaries.” He offers an astonishing hope here, but it is one that Christians should immediately comprehend as perfectly logical: “What if art can free us to be like a child once again; what if our imagination can be sanctified to see the future hopes as a child of God?”

Makoto Fujimura at the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship Conference (2025)



These longings are alien to much of the contemporary art scene. Fujimura got his start in the 1990s, and real artists “were not supposed to speak of beauty in those days, as beauty at the time was seen as suspect in the ‘serious’ ideation of contemporary art. Beauty was the remains of the imperialistic past.” But this prejudice served up a distorted and diminished version of what art can be.

Fujimura suggests that art’s disconnection from truth and beauty makes it harder for artists to reflect reality—much less the relationship with God and culture that allows art to have lasting purpose. As he puts it, “Art that is trapped in hedonism or narcissism will not endure, and worse yet, can become an unwitting (or witting) agent for destruction.” Artists can fall prey to demons and ideological currents and react to things they perceive as unjust in dangerous ways: “The darkness we cannot see can misguide and confuse our journey toward the light.” Of course, many artists deny that there is a light to be found.

Fame can be found pursuing worldly paths, especially those connected to politics:

Artists are sometimes conscripted in the front lines of culture wars and intentionally create transgressive art (but sometimes they volunteer to fight on those front lines as well). Such works, driven by “fifteen minutes of fame,” do not last. But enduring art that creates into the divide can often give us new paradigms, principles of how we see that we can learn from, helping us to sanctify our imaginations to create a more robust, and abundant, future.

By art that “creates into the divide,” Fujimura means art that uses inspiration from varied cultural forms or that reflects the gaps between peoples. These might be fusions of backgrounds and imaginations that open our hearts to experiences that unite humanity, or merely works of sympathy that bridge the spaces between us. He suggests that the best artists are what he calls “border-stalkers” who can more easily scout out these hidden places where art can unite us or show our neighbors new possibilities.

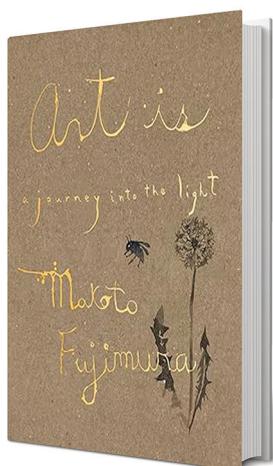
Several chapters in *Art Is* offers examples of this, where these Aragorns of the spirit protect what is essential in culture. Fujimura particularly focuses on what we can learn from the merging of Japanese conceptions of nature, hospitality, and beauty; the American culture of individuality; and the grace offered to us all through Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

He presents the reader with elements of his life story, and in so doing provides a sense of what it means to be raised between two cultures, never fully a part of either but seeking the best that can be learned from both. He is particularly keen to help an Anglophone audience see that in the “Japanese tradition, nature becomes culture, and Japanese art is deeply connected to nature: the complexities and beauty of natural realms are honed and honored in art.”

Fujimura emphasizes the ways that the American soul tends to embrace the utilitarian and technological rather than the natural. He presents Japanese cultural forms and his own “slow art” as a kind of antidote to what he sees as the scarcity mindset that flows from these typical views and wants his readers to embrace “generative” ways of life. This does not deny the importance of markets and growth; it would be hard to imagine Fujimura pursuing his own art and acquiring its rare and precious materials without access to a global economy and flourishing enterprises within it. But it does suggest that markets need moral and spiritual sustenance that they themselves cannot provide.

The practice of *kintsugi* regularly appears in Fujimura’s writings and speeches as an example of what art itself can achieve in this respect. This involves the mending of broken cups or bowls with a lacquer that bonds the pieces together with greater resilience and beauty than was found in the original piece:

Kin means “gold” in Japanese, and *tsugi* means “to mend”; *tsugi* also means to connect generations. The resulting mended *kintsugi* bowl is more



Art Is: A Journey into Light

By Makoto Fujimura
(Yale University Press, 2025)

“
FUJIMURA REJECTS ROMANTIC NOTIONS OF ART THAT REDUCE IT TO A VEHICLE FOR ‘MERE SELF-EXPRESSION’ OR ‘A DEVICE FOR FINDING ONESELF.’
”

valuable than the original because it has been through two masters’ hands—the one who made the ceramic and the one who mended it.

This particular form suggests to him a greater path for art as a whole: “Can we enter the sacred through the imperfect and broken, rather than pretending to be perfect and unbroken and seeking to ‘win’ at all costs? What if art is a path that honors brokenness and allows the light to shine through the cracks?”

Fujimura also illuminates the Japanese tea ceremony as another example of slow art. Invented by Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), this practice developed to become “a disciplined ritual requiring the apprentice to spend more than a decade just to begin to master all the minute movements.” The tea ceremony came into vogue during a period of great violence and upheaval. Fujimura argues that the ritual became a mode of artistic communication to “serve and communicate with warlords” and that “almost everything Rikyū did to refine the art of tea was an intentional act of peacemaking in a time of brutal dictatorial reigns filled with violence and death.” Perhaps more controversially, Fujimura shares his conviction that Rikyū was a secret Christian and notes that his ceremony was used as a covert stand-in for Holy Communion for decades after his death: “Rikyū created the liturgy of tea (a liturgy not unlike communion in a Catholic Mass) to preserve the sacred act of Christian worship via hidden means.” Fujimura argues that Rikyū’s confidant and patron, the anti-Christian warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), recognized the Christian



Portrait of Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591) by Hasegawa Tōhaku



Makoto Fujimura explains *kintsugi* art in London (2023)

symbolism in the ceremony and that this contributed to his decision to order Rikyū to commit ritual suicide in 1591. (It is reported that Rikyū first performed a beautiful tea ceremony for guests, then read out a “death poem” to the dagger he used to kill himself.)

These examples suggest the hope Fujimura has for a revival of art connected to truth and beauty. He plainly sees the ways our culture is distracted and divorced from reality such that any broader reconversion and restoration of a Christian culture will need unusual evangelists. The very categories within which our culture tends to understand what matters may stand in the way. Consider one such opposition:

Reason and faith have been seen as separate categories and domains, but what if art can bring them together to bear witness to the marvelous intricacies of the deeper knowledge of grace....Perhaps in educating the whole person, we need to address the totality of our being, including to “see with the eyes of our heart.”

Just as art might show us ways of uniting opposites in culture and allow adults to recover the innocence of children’s eyes, so too might it open hearts to Christianity.

Fujimura fully appreciates the challenges any such revival faces. Just as many fear for the intellectual life in an age that seems to be leaving books behind, he worries we are no longer able to recognize beauty because our minds are not *still*: “Art cannot be fully seen until our minds, usually filled with fears and anxiety, are given rest.” Yet because we are made in God’s image, hope always endures: “Our lives are

love’s remains, prismatic surfaces, shards of mystery, a portal into a greater Reality.”

Focusing as Fujimura is on inviting readers into a world of seeing anew, *Art Is* offers little in the way of prescriptions. Nor would they be particularly appropriate for this work. But he does recognize resonances between art and other fields that bear mentioning. He believes that we must not lose sight of how education helps shape hearts and minds and that liberal education alongside the arts can serve as “an antidote for our tech-filled culture war journey that only creates anxiety and fear.” He implies that a politics rooted in this tradition and education is perhaps our best hope.

Speaking of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., Fujimura notes that their “voices convey urgency and beauty; they are not afraid to take on complexity, stewarding prismatic shards of ideals given to them, a refractive splendor of enduring vistas that they could not reach.”

In our fractured era of video clips and social media posts, with politics tending ever more toward tribal and ideological tendencies, we certainly need a politics that can embrace truth and beauty. But it is impossible to imagine a turn in that direction without more of us first seeing and embracing love’s remnants in our own lives, and *Art Is* offers an exhortation to start. **RL**

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



British Conservatism: Past, Present, Future

Conservatism has a long history in Britain, one rooted in its Christian faith and constitutional order. Can it be revived short of a religious revival? And can immigrants from very different cultures contribute to its rebirth?

by JOSH HERRING

RATHER THAN THE SIMPLE unity of a typical monograph, *Intellectual Conservatism: From Burke to Scruton* is unified through the authors' explorations of the roots, applications, and nuances of specifically British conservative thought. The styles of writing are varied, as happens with a volume composed of conference papers. Some essays read with compelling prose; others reflect academic research norms. Editors (and contributors) Forenc Hörcher and Daniel Pitt have nevertheless assembled an impressive lineup of writers who find in British conservatism a vital political and philosophical tradition that could ground a future British Conservative Party.

Intellectual Conservatism succeeds in showcasing the rigor of conservative thought and the vitality of conservatism in English political life.

Daniel Pitt opens the book attempting to define conservatism. The term itself has become “too elastic,” and “it is the role of academics to ‘de-elasticify’ the concept and provide academic rigour to the subject rather than reducing thought to actions of self-described groups.” Pitt illustrates British conservatism through seven principles:

- (1) the organic nature of society;
- (2) skepticism of human's reasoning powers;
- (3) the suspicion

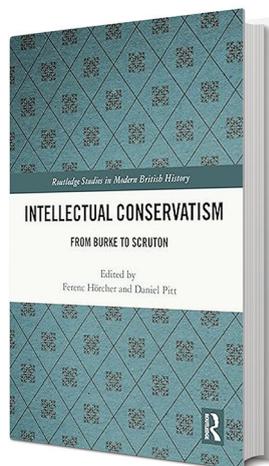
of grand political blueprints; (4) an historical-empirical approach to decision-making; (5) a commitment to past and future generations; (6) the wisdom of generations, tradition, and custom; and (7) a trustee model of representation.

These principles preexisted Edmund Burke but were best articulated by Burke, Bagehot, and other exemplary thinkers of British constitutional law. Pitt argues that these principles gave rise to the British constitutional order.

Co-editor Ferenc Hörcher goes on to present three key conservative thinkers and schools of thought in post-WWII England: Michael Oakeshott and the London School of Economics (LSE), Maurice Cowling and the Peterhouse Right, and Roger Scruton's circle of intellectual writers at the *Salisbury Review*. These figures and institutions contributed to the rise of intellectual conservatism as a serious body of knowledge in the postwar era. "There can be no doubt that the father figure in all this is Oakeshott. His extraordinary appointment as head of the government department of the LSE can be viewed as the symbolic moment of the birth of post-WW2 British intellectual conservatism."

P. Bracy Bersnak then considers the novels and short stories of Evelyn Waugh. Bersnak writes that "literature has a unique power to arouse a sense of loss of social goods by appealing to the imagination and emotions. Perhaps no writer in the English language did this better than Waugh. His novels show how an inheritance can be lost, even squandered, and the consequences of this loss." In addition, Waugh shows "a consistent view of human nature, community, and history that is profound and philosophically

Edmund Burke (1729–1797) by Sir Joshua Reynolds



Intellectual Conservatism: From Burke to Scruton

Edited by
Ferenc Hörcher
and Daniel Pitt
(Routledge, 2025)

conservative." And Waugh's conservatism is most often expressed satirically: "Waugh shows that the 'conservatism' of observing inherited social conventions is inadequate to preserve those conventions if it is not based on an understanding of the principles on which they are based." Bersnak's analysis conveys Waugh's humor and snark, even in summary. Below is one representative sample analyzing Waugh's short story "Love Among the Ruins":

Miles Plastic...is a lifelong ward of the state and "the Modern Man." Even though the State "made him" according to its designs, he sets fire to the Air Force training station, killing half his fellow servicemen. Miles is charged with committing an "anti-social act," not arson or manslaughter. The judge reminds the jury that "it was a first principle of New Law that no man could be held responsible for the consequences of his own acts." Instead, the bureaucrats say: "In the New Britain which we are building, there are no criminals. There are only victims of inadequate social services."

Needless to say, Waugh's satire has aged well. Bersnak concludes that "Western society today is rich with potential for satire. Would that we had another Waugh to instruct us and ply us with healing laughter amid contemporary barbarism." Intellectual conservatism is not just the movement of Burke and later political theorists. It also owns Waugh, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, and the conservative disposition expressed in literature.

Intellectual Conservatism also explores practical applications of conservative principles. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom has had



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Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966)



Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science

Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990)

a Conservative Party for decades. While the Conservative Party as of this writing is out of power, the ascent of the Labour Party in U.K. politics has prompted much soul-searching. What went wrong? How can the Conservative Party recover? In considering these questions, the authors examine the relationship between conservatism as a philosophical disposition and as a political reality.

To begin, Philip Norton argues that conservatives are politically successful when four realities exist: Conservatives must be perceived as “a party of governance”; as having trustworthy hands to manage “the nation’s finances”; as unified “even after periods of upheaval”; and as demonstrating “a sense of public service.” When such perceptions dip, Conservatives fail to attract electors. Norton contends that the present Conservative Party has failed in these four domains. He also lists a fifth reality outside the Conservative Party’s control: “Its opponents have split at times opportune for the party.” Regaining political power requires recovering the confidence of the British people that Conservatives seek to serve the British people, are trustworthy to govern financially, and have a clear vision that will unite people for electoral victory in a parliamentary system.

The remainder of *Intellectual Conservatism* addresses complex questions faced by contemporary British conservatism. Two articles tackle the question of free speech. Matt Beech offers a compelling case that free speech cannot be separated from the Christian heritage of Western civilization. Beech sees no route for recovering a universally understood value of free speech without



MATT BEECH OFFERS A COMPELLING CASE THAT FREE SPEECH CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM THE CHRISTIAN HERITAGE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION.



mass revival: “It is not via time and chance, but in the fullness of centuries of Christendom that the fruit of bounded liberty under the law, and the protection within the law of the person from arbitrary power, emerges.”

Zeena Mistry adds a different note to the discussion of free speech. As a British Indian, Mistry found that the majority of British Indians she surveyed agreed with British ideals of free speech. Mistry concludes that British conservatism should find an ally among British Indians. Mistry’s essay also raises questions applicable to wider conservatism. The 4th National Conservatism conference, held in Washington, D.C., in July 2024, attempted to bring conservative Iranians and Indians into its coalition and raised questions about just how multicultural a nationalistic conservatism can be.

Mistry raises the same questions, given the running thread of conservatism’s tie to national traditions throughout *Intellectual Conservatism*. To what extent do immigrants from a different culture need to assimilate to the culture of their new homeland if they claim to be conservative? Can British Indians, 68.8% of which identify as Hindu and over 8% as Sikh, according to Mistry, access a philosophical conservatism rooted in Christianity? It should be noted that *Intellectual Conservatism* grounds conservatism in the cultural customs of Christianity that developed organically across centuries in England, so to what extent can those from a different culture and religion lay claim to a conservative *British* identity? The tensions are clear in Mistry’s closing line: “I propose that thinkers of conservatism should not be afraid to work with Britain’s ethnic minority communities, who tend to be more conservative, to preserve the nation and freedoms that we all hold dearly.” While Mistry upholds the external results of conservatism, she does not accept the roots of British conservatism.

In a chapter entitled “Conservatism, Religion, and Monarchy,” Sebastian Morello makes a fascinating case for the necessity of religious establishment to ground political conservatism. He asks, “Why is there a widely acknowledged connection between conservatism and religion, or between conservative commitments and religious convictions?” To answer the question, he explores the thought of Burke and Joseph Maistre as canonical conservative authors at the root of modern conservatism. “For Burke, there is a moral law with which the cosmos itself is pregnant, and this law of creation reflects the very nature and

order of the godhead.” All positive law must cohere with the natural law; natural law is both revealed and defined by the Christian faith.

Maistre, however, takes a different view: “Maistre says that there are two options available: Europe has before it the choice of Christianity or slavery: ‘the wills of men must be either purified, or enchained; there is no medium.’” Rather than physical enslavement, Maistre considers internal enslavement to desire the greater danger. Religion teaches men self-restraint, and thus freedom from enslavement to desire. Morello considers the modern condition as one enslaved to hedonistic desire, suggesting that Maistre’s argument was correct. He concludes from his survey that “conservatism is in essence a defense of human personhood, and as such it invariably—to the degree to which it is explicit in such a defense of personhood—roots itself in religious communities.” In a British context, Morello argues for Christianity as the religious establishment, but so long as the religion has a clear vision of human personhood, he suggests that other religions could ground a nationalist conservatism.

Through 14 essays, *Intellectual Conservatism* presents a vision of British conservatism tied to the traditions of Western civilization, Christianity, and Europe. It is not content to consist merely of ideas; it demands action. Those actions are always limited, however, and determined by a specific people, place, and time. Conservatism stands athwart the *zeitgeist*, and the *zeitgeist* that gave the movement birth emerged circa 1789. It has since remained in the halls of academe and power, provoking the conservative continually to describe and recover what has been lost and suit itself to the world in which we now live.

In short, intellectual conservatism is an ongoing conversation spanning various places and times. And like the best conversations, it continues and does not have a fixed set of prescriptions. *Intellectual Conservatism* is an admirable contribution to this conversation and will be a valued resource to academics seeking to define, reiterate, and articulate their tradition. ■

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CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Michael Matheson Miller

Q As director of the Center for Social Flourishing for the Acton Institute, your brief is to investigate the causes and possible solutions to the problem of global poverty. That's quite a challenge, and I would think a burden. What inspired you to take this on?

Before answering, I think it's important to state that poverty is complex, it has multiple causes, and there is no ultimate solution to the problem of poverty. But that does not mean there is nothing we can or should do. The inspiration to address this problem is threefold.

First, concern for the poor is a central theme of Christianity. St. James writes that pure religion is to care for the widow and the orphan and to keep oneself unstained from the world. Pope Leo XIV recently

wrote an exhortation reminding us that care for the poor is not merely an option among other things: We are called to have a heart for the poor and to practice charity. In the Catholic tradition, almsgiving is one of the "eminently good works," along with fasting and prayer. This also relates directly to Acton's work and our mission to promote a free and virtuous society, which must include access to justice and improving the lives of the poor.

Second, I was influenced by St. John Paul II, especially his book *Love and Responsibility* and his work on the Theology of the Body, which highlights the truth that each human person is not an object to be used, manipulated, or socially engineered. Despite good intentions in many of the ways we've tried to help, we have tended to treat the poor as objects of charity and our pity instead of the protagonist of their own story of development.

Third, many years ago during my graduate studies in international development, my parents were living in West Africa, and so the question of global poverty and access to justice became a real interest of mine. Yet the dominant models in development economics were influenced by a foreign aid model and technocratic planning. At that time, the only person I found writing in a different mode was Peter Bauer. William Easterly and other critics of the aid model had not yet been published. Part of my hope with PovertyCure and *Poverty, Inc.* was to create a network and especially a resource for students and others to be able to find alternative models rooted in enterprise solutions to poverty, something I did not have when I was a student.

Q Your documentary *Poverty, Inc.* won raves from figures associated with the World Bank, the Whole Planet Foundation, and Harvard Law, and even from filmmaker Michael Moore. Why do you think it struck a chord with such a diverse group worldwide? What do you think made them think differently about a subject they had almost certainly wrestled with before?

We were delighted with the response to the film and grateful that so many people found it helpful. I think perhaps three things especially helped diverse groups of people appreciate the film. First, many of our discussions about poverty and development policy are conducted by experts or celebrities on behalf of poor people. In *Poverty, Inc.*, people were able to see and hear people from the developing world tell their own stories. This I think opened people up to new perspectives.

Second, in making the film we were very careful to avoid as much as possible right-wing or left-wing boilerplate language. We tried to avoid “red meat” approaches and to respect the good intentions of the

people we were critiquing. No doubt, *Poverty, Inc.* has a point of view and made strong critiques, but we tried to do it in a way that reframed the issues. Not everyone liked it, of course, but this approach I think allowed people with different points of view to wrestle with these questions in a new way.

Third, we tried to reframe the debate away from “caring” and “having a heart for the poor” to questions about justice and whether our good intentions were helping or causing harm. We focused on portraying poor people as subjects, not objects—as protagonists with energy and agency—and this, too, showed poverty in a different light.

Q The PovertyCure series of films confronts misconceptions surrounding the subject of poverty, such as overpopulation, agricultural subsidies, and the “value” of foreign aid and charity. Why do you think it is so difficult to get people to abandon failed initiatives and to rethink their strategies? Is it just inertia? Ideology? The money pipeline?

There are several reasons for this. There is no doubt that the poverty industry is big business, and there are incentives to continue with the foreign aid model. Beyond that, for many people who want to help, many of the dominant ideas sound correct at first. We think that if we just send food or transfer money through foreign aid, we can build bridges and roads and provide healthcare, and everyone will be better off. People have compassion, and these ideas dominate popular culture. On the other hand, it sounds harsh and lacking compassion to say we should not give foreign aid. One of the goals of *Poverty, Inc.* and PovertyCure was to reframe the discussion to help people see aid and charity differently: to see that these ideas and programs don’t actually deliver on their promises, and can often do harm. Also, to see that the real problem for people in poor countries is not simply a lack of material goods or even infrastructure, but exclusion from the institutions of justice that would enable them to create prosperity in their own families and communities. In the United States, we take for granted things like clear title to land, access to courts, and ease of starting a business. These are missing in many poor countries, and the foreign aid development model actually creates incentives for recipient governments not to build these institutions.

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**CONCERN FOR THE POOR
IS A CENTRAL THEME
OF CHRISTIANITY.**
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Regarding the myth of overpopulation, there are several reasons it persists. First, it's just an error of intuition. We visit the developing world and we see lots of children around asking for money and we think "If there were fewer children, there would be more money to go around, and these children wouldn't be so poor." This is the zero-sum game that sees the economy as a pie and doesn't recognize the productive potential of people. Exclusion from the institutions of justice is the main problem, not too many people. Also, population control, too, is big business. Billions of dollars have been spent on reducing populations despite lack of evidence that population causes poverty.

Plus, this idea of overpopulation is so popular in the dominant culture that it makes sense that people are surprised to hear it's not true. Whenever I make the counterargument, people are very skeptical at first, because they have been inundated with ideologies that see people as a burden on the economy or a scourge on the environment. The adherence to population-control policies goes far beyond economic fallacies but is rooted in a deep cultural and theological struggle over what it means to be a human person. How we think about the person shapes so much of how we see politics and economics. And this is why we start every Acton conference with a talk on the "Christian Vision of the Person." It is this vision of the person as the protagonist of development with creative capacity that underlies all our work with PovertyCure, *Poverty, Inc.*, and our new Center for Social Flourishing.

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THE PROBLEMS FOR THE POOREST OF THE POOR IN THE U.S. INCLUDE BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS, MENTAL ILLNESS, DRUG ABUSE, AND A LACK OF SOCIAL CAPITAL.
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Q You're putting the finishing touches on a follow-up to *Poverty, Inc.*, a documentary focused on poverty in this country specifically. What sparked the domestic focus? Did you feel that the problem of U.S. poverty has gotten worse since 2016, when the film's predecessor debuted?

As we screened *Poverty, Inc.* around the U.S., many people felt that, despite the differences between poverty in the U.S. and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, there was a similar problem with the expert-led technocratic approach to poverty alleviation. We were continually asked if we were going to do a film on poverty in America. Over the last several years, we have been traveling around the United States and meeting people addressing many different forms of poverty.

Is poverty getting worse? Depending upon how you analyze the numbers, the general poverty rate in the U.S. has either stayed the same or slightly decreased over the past few decades (some analysts say that if you count transfer programs, then poverty has declined quite a bit), yet we still have persistent intergenerational poverty and the lowest-income workers struggling with high inflation and becoming increasingly fragile. Among the poorest, we continue to see social breakdown, what Seth Kaplan has called "Fragile Neighborhoods," and increases in drug overdoses and homelessness. There are real challenges in America, but in our work we have also come across amazing people who are helping the homeless, rebuilding neighborhoods, and helping to create social cohesion and economic opportunity. In sum, I would say that, while the primary problem of the poorest of the poor in the developing world is exclusion from the institutions of justice, the problems for the poorest of the poor in the U.S. include broken relationships, mental illness, drug abuse, and a lack of social capital. It's also important to note that poverty is not just material. There is social and spiritual poverty in the U.S. that is not limited to the materially poor, and that, too, has to be addressed when thinking about this country.

Q What kind of feedback have you gotten from all these initiatives that gives you hope that global poverty either is on the decline or soon will be?

It's quite clear from generally accepted data that there has been a decline in global poverty in the decades



since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has been especially noticeable in the economic growth seen in India and other parts of Asia. Yet many African countries have not reaped the benefits of globalization. China, too, is a special case. There is no doubt that millions of Chinese escaped from extreme poverty, yet millions more are excluded from justice and suffer oppression from the communist state.

Regarding the dominant model of economic development, I think there are a number of voices trying to reframe the debate: people like Magatte Wade, William Easterly, and the late George Ayittey who share the *Poverty, Inc.* vision of enterprise solutions to poverty. We have also seen some serious challenges to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the foreign aid model from the Trump administration, but that has mostly focused on corruption and not on a fundamental critique of the model. Unfortunately, the foreign aid, technocratic approach is still dominant, and so we still have a lot of work to do, but there are rising voices across the

world promoting enterprise solutions and access to justice for the poor. We are currently in the middle of a 10-year anniversary screening tour of *Poverty, Inc.* and have been delighted that more and more people are questioning the aid model.

Q Fun Questions: (a) What book(s) have you read at least three times, and why? (b) If you could blow up one public building, à la Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, without endangering life or risking imprisonment, which one would it be? (c) What's your favorite B&W film, and why?

(a) Nonfiction: C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*. *The Abolition of Man* is I think one of the most important books of the 20th century. It's a critique of technocracy, of relativism, and of empiricist rationality that echoes Edmund Burke and is seen in Benedict XVI's eloquent defense of reason. The first chapter, "Men Without Chests," cannot be read too often. I also read and re-read the works of Joseph Ratzinger: his essays in the collection *Values in a Time of Upheaval* and the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*. His insights into the challenges of the modern world, his political and social philosophy, and his analysis of the Gospels have taught me so much over the years that a lot of what I do in my lecturing is to try and distill Lewis and Benedict XVI.

Fiction: I've read *Father Elijah* by Michael O'Brien seven times. His insights into the modern struggle with unbelief, despair, and maintaining faith in the face of suffering are profound. I think it can be read alongside Henri de Lubac's *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

(b) I've never read Ayn Rand, so I don't know who Howard Roark is (though I have just started *Atlas Shrugged* for a program I am doing). But, wow, there are so many incredibly ugly, high-modernist buildings throughout the world that razing them would be a boon to mankind, and especially the poor who were shuttled into them by large-scale urban planning.

(c) *Casablanca* and *Sergeant York*. *Casablanca* is just a great story, and *Sergeant York* is an inspiring example of conversion and bravery. I'm sure I'm missing something, but those two are great. **RI**.

Michael Matheson Miller is the chief of strategic initiatives, senior research fellow, and director of the Center for Social Flourishing at the Acton Institute.

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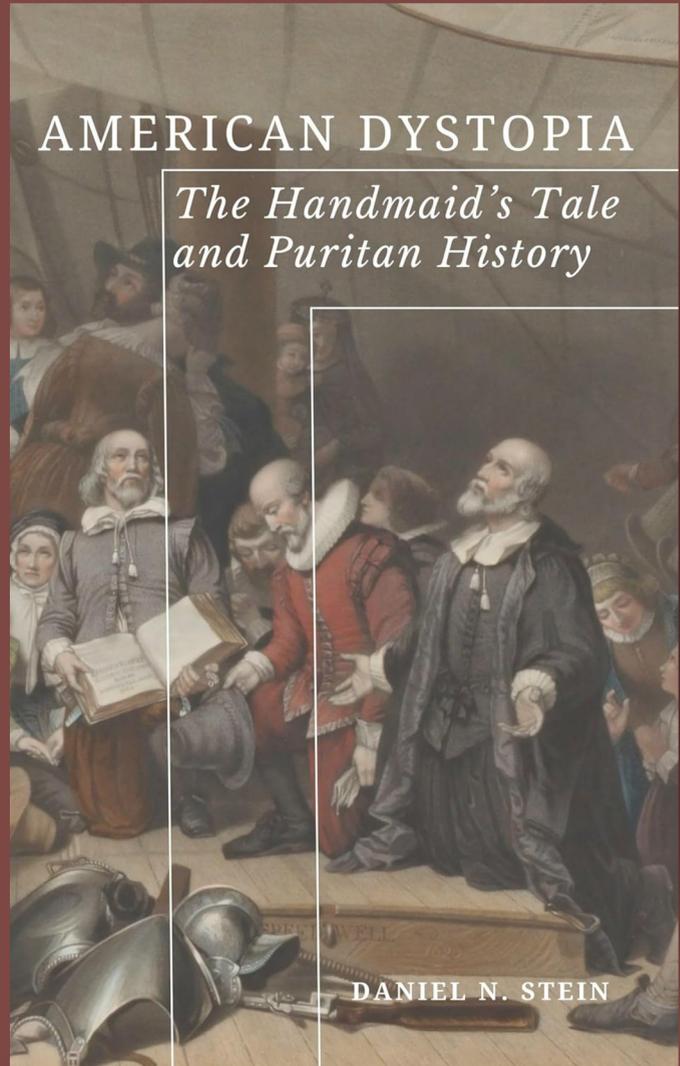
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