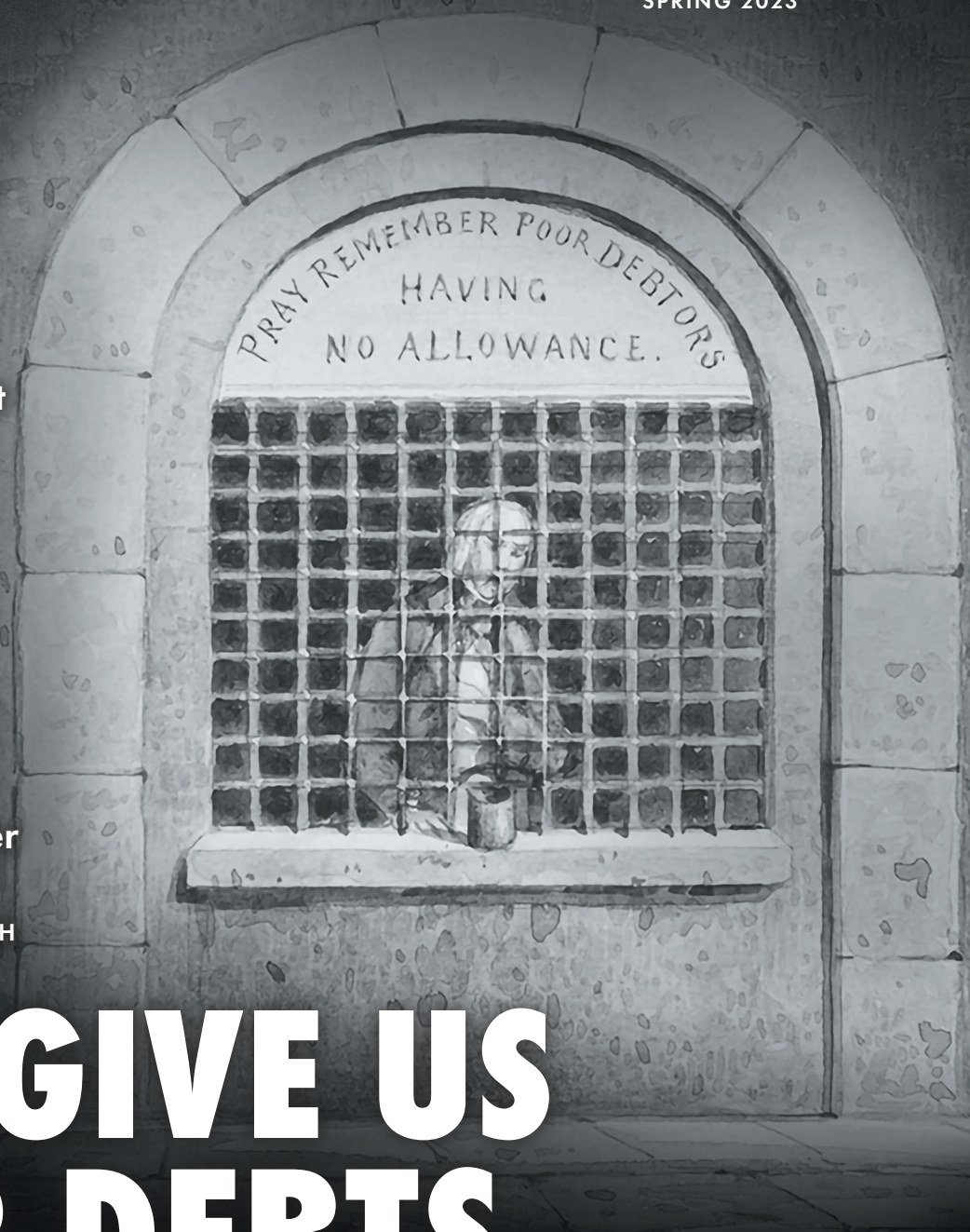
# Religion & Liberty

SPRING 2023

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BY PAUL D. MUELLER

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Anthony Sacramone

**GRAPHIC DESIGN**
Cantelon Design

**PROOFREADER**
Lauren Mann

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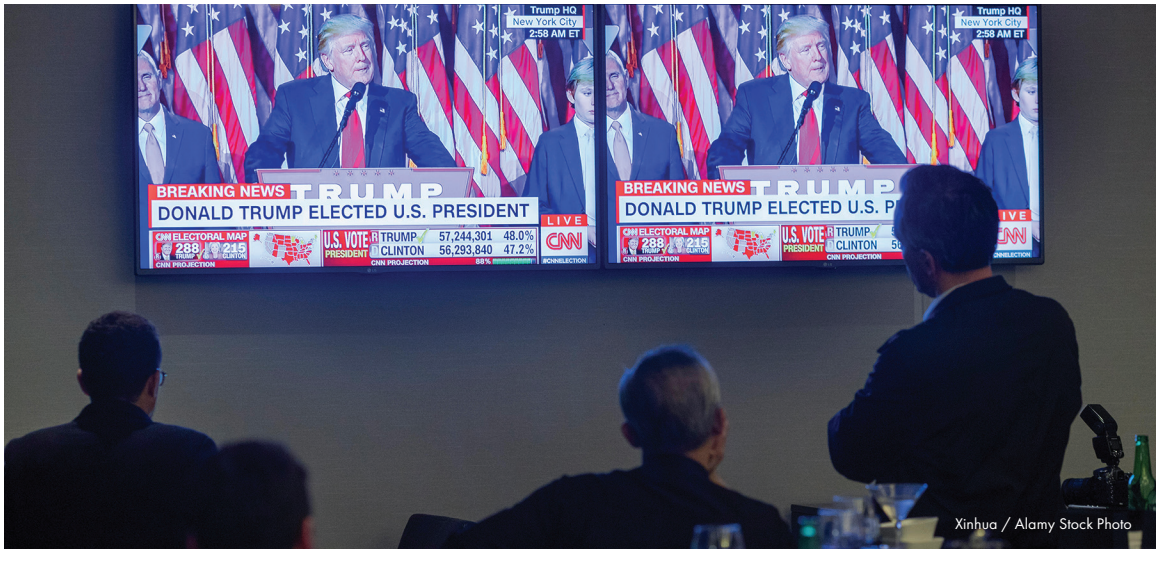

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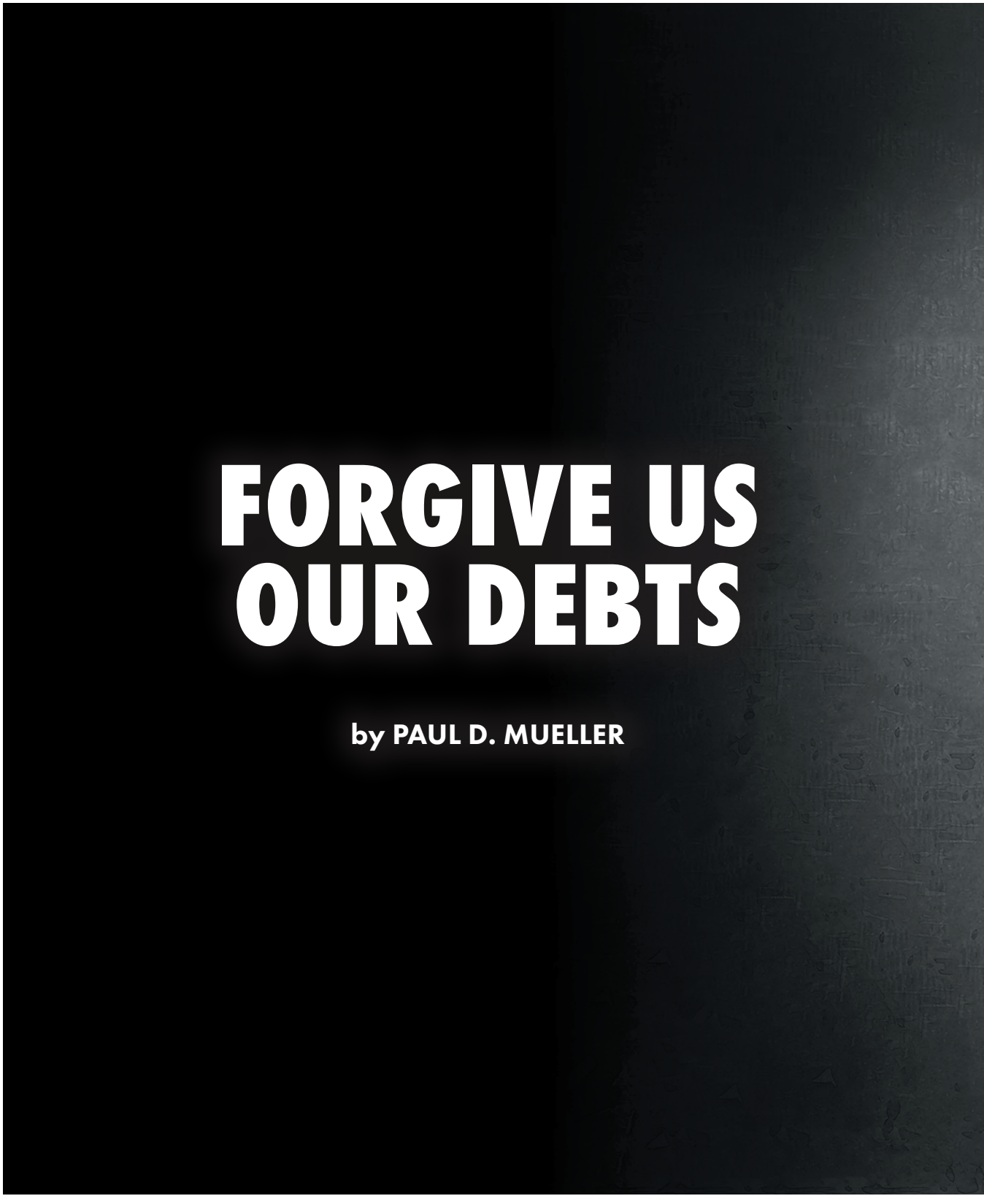
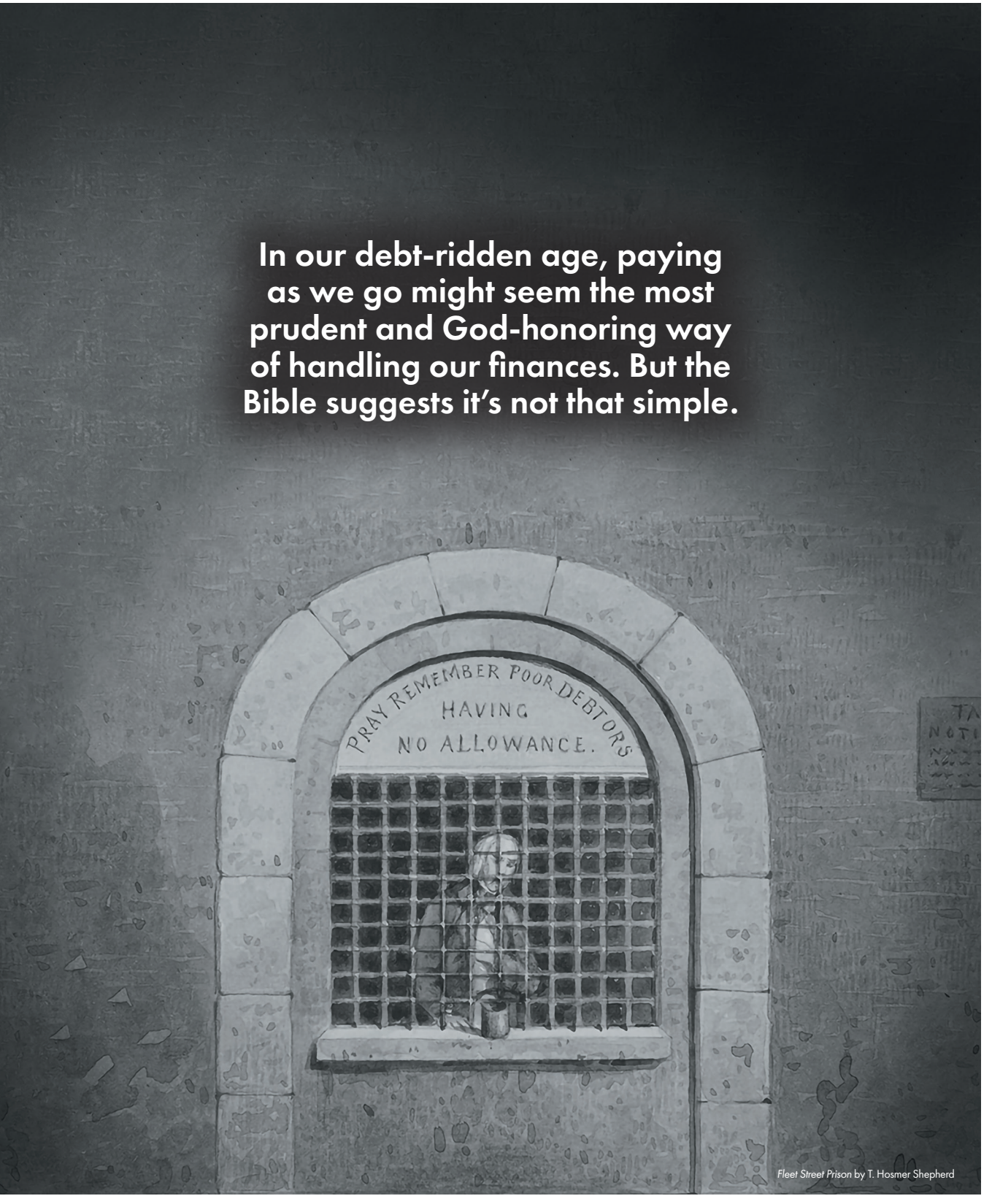


# FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

by PAUL D. MUELLER




*Fleet Street Prison* by T. Hosmer Shepherd

**DEBT CAN BE A CRUEL MASTER,** but it can also be a powerful servant. Debt is a tool. And like any tool, debt can be dangerous to those who misuse it and a snare to those who rely on it too much. It can also harm others if used badly. As Christians, we should not fear or shun using debt anymore than we should fear or shun weapons or fire or technology or power.

There are many perspectives on debt. From the hostility of Dave Ramsey to the embrace of Richard Kiyosaki, from the condemnation of usury (lending at interest) by Aristotle and Aquinas to the approval of usury offered by John Calvin, debt can be a complicated moral, financial, and spiritual issue. Although today people think of usury as "excessively high interest" debt, historically usury referred to all lending at interest—and that is how I will use the term in this essay.

Considering God's purposes for humanity from the cultural mandate to the greatest commandments, historical treatments of debt, whether embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures, discussed by ancient Greek philosophers and medieval theologians, or as used by men and women in a modern economy, will reveal that borrowing and lending at interest are morally permissible and can promote human flourishing.

## THE CULTURAL MANDATE AND THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

Theologians have long noted "the cultural mandate" in the first chapter of the Bible. After creating Adam and Eve, God tells them to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28, ESV). Before the fall and the curse of sin, God intended men and women to have families, cultivate the earth, domesticate animals, and engage in other forms of cultural and economic activity. Working, creating, and building involve stewarding resources well and developing technology. Furthermore, creating wealth provides us means for obeying the greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40).

We can demonstrate love for God by how we use our physical resources. God required regular material sacrifices in Israelite worship. In the New Testament, God commends the sacrificial giving of the widow's mite and the woman who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. God wants human beings to show Him love and honor with their wealth.

We can also love our neighbor with our resources. In both the Old and the New Testaments, loving one's neighbor almost always involves material care—sharing or giving of one's resources as well as forgiving debts (Lev. 25:39–40). Examples abound, from Abraham hosting angels, to Boaz providing

**Abraham serving the angels as depicted by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1646**

for Ruth and Naomi, to David and Mephibosheth, to Elijah and Elisha toward the women who cared for them, to the sharing of all things in common (Acts 2:44–45), to the gentile churches sharing resources with the church in Jerusalem during a famine.

The cultural mandate and the two greatest commandments demonstrate the importance and purpose of wealth, and therefore of debt. They also explain why many passages in Scripture prohibit lending at interest (usury) and taking profit. In those situations, doing so harmed one's neighbor, and by extension the community, which reflected badly on God and displayed callous selfishness rather than love. Similarly, philosophers from Aristotle to Aquinas condemned usury because they thought its use was not consistent with the flourishing of one's community or loving one's neighbors—especially the poorest and the most vulnerable.

In agrarian societies, most people produced barely enough to survive. Children would rarely be richer than their parents. Income did not usually rise over the course of one's life as it does today. The risk of starvation was always present for most people. This context presents a problem when you borrow something. Not only do you have to return what you borrowed, but you must generate some surplus to pay interest. That was a nearly impossible task for most people and often led to their selling themselves or their family into slavery.

But borrowing and lending in our modern era are not inherently sinful. With economic growth and prosperity, borrowing is not undertaken because of dire circumstances only. In fact, wealthy people tend to borrow much greater sums than the poor do. In class, I sometimes tell my students, most of whom are borrowing tens of thousands of dollars to pay for

> **“BORROWING AND LENDING AT INTEREST ARE MORALLY PERMISSIBLE AND CAN PROMOTE HUMAN FLOURISHING.”**

college, that I have borrowed more money than all of them put together. Yet I am far from poor—in fact, the reason why I can borrow so much is because I am not poor! I have assets, investments, and income to service loans and pay interest, and I can put that borrowed money to productive uses in ways that didn't exist a thousand years ago.

## DEBT IN THE TORAH

Considerations of usury in the Old Testament are less about the practice of lending itself than about the particular harms caused by the practice in certain contexts. The Israelites were literally family. Therefore not sharing was reprehensible and punished severely by their laws. Furthermore, God hates people engaging in usury in ways that enslave their neighbors or harm and exploit the most vulnerable.

Old Testament authors saw lending in a very particular light and context: rich lending to poor; charging interest as harmful, almost punitive; and lending as power and borrowing as weakness or disadvantage. Nor were they wrong to see it this way.

In ancient and medieval societies, people borrowed because of tragedy, weakness, or desperation—a drought, a blight, the death of a husband or father, etc.—hence the importance of stories about widows and orphans. The poor would borrow from those with wealth, influence, and power. As I mentioned earlier, God created rules regarding slavery, lending, and Jubilee to protect the vulnerable and promote shalom in a society of brothers and sisters.

At first glance, God appears to take a very dim view of usury. He repeatedly prohibits the Israelites from employing usury and taking profit from their fellow Israelites:

> Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. —*Leviticus 25:36–37*

> If a man is righteous and does what is just and right—if he…does not lend at interest or take any profit…he shall surely live, declares the Lord God. —*Ezekiel 18:8*

> You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. —*Deuteronomy 23:19*

> Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit gathers it for him who is generous to the poor. —*Proverbs 28:8*

> Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He…who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent. —*Psalm 15:5*

While this may seem like a sweeping condemnation of lending money at interest, deeper consideration

**A ninth-century illustration of Moses teaching the Law to the Israelites, from the Bible of Charles the Bald**

> **GOD SEEMS FOCUSED ON THE WELFARE OF THE POOR BROTHER, NOT ON THE INHERENT SINFULNESS OF BORROWING AND LENDING.**

of the context suggests that God is not condemning usury per se, but rather abusive uses of usury. Consider that: (1) these condemnations take place within a specific set of relationships and situations; (2) other passages allow and even encourage lending at interest; (3) Scripture condemns lending, not as inherently sinful (like, say, adultery or worshiping an idol), but as one of a variety of practices that can be used sinfully—namely, not loving one's neighbor and not caring for the poor.

Notice, for example, the connections between poverty, borrowing, and debt. The Pentateuch addresses usury in Exodus 22, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 15, 23, and 28. In Exodus 22:25, God tells the Israelites that "if you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." Notice that the command explicitly talks about lending *to the poor*. This passage stresses caring for the poor, and it condemns usury as harming or neglecting them.

This fits the preceding verse (22), which talks about not taking advantage of widows and orphans, who would be the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. It also fits the subsequent verses (26–27) about the importance of returning a poor neighbor's pledged cloak before nightfall because it could be his only cloak and he will be more exposed to the elements if you keep it.

The Leviticus 25:36–37 passage is similar. Before the verse about not charging interest, we are explicitly told that the borrower is poor and unable to support himself. God says we have a responsibility to care for such a brother. Then comes the prohibition: "You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit."

God seems focused on the welfare of the poor brother, not on the inherent sinfulness of borrowing and lending. By the way, the broader context of this chapter in Leviticus is the year of Jubilee, when debts were to be forgiven and Hebrew slaves were to be freed. God institutes the year of Jubilee because He brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt: "For they are *my servants*, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be *sold as slaves*. You shall not *rule over him ruthlessly* but shall fear your God" (Lev. 25:42–43, emphasis added). Canceling debts freed the poor from slavery and destitution.

There is another significant reason why this was part of the Mosaic law: God's ownership of the land and the inheritance he intended for his people. Returning land in the year of Jubilee is part of God's rules of inheritance, as the land ultimately belongs to Him.

Deuteronomy 15:8 has similar commands about caring for the poor and not charging them interest, but it adds a further detail of what biblical authors assume when they talk about charging interest: that lenders are rich and borrowers are poor. Why else would God tell Israel multiple times that if they follow him they will be blessed, wealthy, and *lenders* to the nations rather than borrowers?

> For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you. —*Deuteronomy 15:6*

> The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. —*Deuteronomy 28:12*

If they don't follow God, however, they will be poor and borrow from the nations: "He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail" (Deut. 28:44). The author of Proverbs echoes this idea: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender" (22:7).

Similarly, why would God allow them to charge

> **RETURNING LAND IN THE YEAR OF JUBILEE IS PART OF GOD'S RULES OF INHERITANCE, AS THE LAND ULTIMATELY BELONGS TO HIM.**

interest to the nations but not to their brothers: "You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest" (Deut. 23:20)? In fact, when it comes to a brother, "you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be," instead of shutting your hand and hardening your heart to your *poor* brother.

I should note that biblical authors are not always talking about a formal business transaction when referring to borrowing and lending. Letting someone use your hammer or drill or borrow your car for a day, giving a friend your umbrella temporarily, these would all be modern examples of the kinds of lending the Bible speaks about in Psalm 37:26, Psalm 112:5, and Proverbs 19:17, for example.

We can't always distinguish when "lend" really means "give." We've all experienced situations where we have "lent" something and never gotten it back. This can be irksome if we expected it back, but we will often lend not expecting anything in return. Luke 11:5 illustrates how "lend" can be used to mean "give": "And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves."'"

This is clearly not a business transaction. The friend may hope or expect that you will give him some loaves in the future, but you will clearly not be returning these three loaves the way you would return a plow.

We find more condemnation of usury in Nehemiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. These condemnations fit the pattern I've described above: God requires us to care for the poor and to practice generosity rather than greedily seeking gain when we interact with the poor and the vulnerable. Doing so honors God and recognizes that He did not make us to rule ruthlessly over our fellow men and women as slaves.

Nehemiah condemns the wealthy Israelites for not dealing generously with their poor brothers and sisters. Instead, the wealthy Israelites charged the poor so much interest and profit that the poor say, "[We] are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.…[We] are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards" (Neh. 5:3–5).

These verses show something else God cares about—people's ability to generate income, which in agrarian societies primarily consisted of food and clothing, to provide for themselves, and to be part of the community. Not only are the poor indebted in Nehemiah's time but they also have no means to improve their situation because they have mortgaged or sold their productive assets (fields and vineyards). They are permanently poor now and slavery must inevitably follow. Nehemiah explicitly calls out the charging of interest (in violation of the Pentateuch's prohibitions) as the main problem: "I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, 'You are exacting interest, each from his brother.' And I held a great assembly against them.…Let us abandon this exacting of interest"(Neh. 5:7–10).

The context suggests that the problem stems from *the particular use* of usury, not from the activity itself. Such a reading resolves the otherwise puzzling passages about lending to foreigners and Jesus' parable of how the servant should have given the talent to the bankers to lend with interest (Matt. 25:14–30).

## ANCIENT PHILOSOPHERS AND MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIANS

Before the 18th century, there were no "economists." But philosophers and theologians often considered economic questions like "What is wealth and how should it be used?" and "What does justice in the marketplace look like?" They often wrote about usury and generally concluded that it was unjust.

Aristotle, for example, argued that usury was unnatural and a distortion of an appropriate use of wealth. In seeking to live well, people need all kinds of material goods. Many of these goods could be produced within an extended household, but not all of them. Aristotle approves trading one's surplus for a

roughly equivalent amount of someone else's surplus (e.g., a bushel of olives for a bushel of grapes). Money can serve a useful intermediary function in these exchanges, but fundamentally people are trading commodities for other commodities.

Usury, however, does not fit this paradigm. The lender begins with money and ends with more money. He both gets more than he gives and mistakes means for ends. There are "natural" limits to how much commodities one gathers. At some point people have enough gallons of olive oil or pairs of shoes or sets of dishes. Collecting thousands of these things does not make sense. But collecting a thousand dollars does. Or ten thousand. Or ten million. In fact, there is no "natural" limit to one's monetary accumulation.

Regarding trading practices, Aristotle writes:

> The most hated sort, and with the greatest reason, is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of getting wealth, this is the most unnatural. (*Politics*, Book I)

Beyond the danger of unrestrained acquisitiveness, Aristotle was also concerned about usury's injustice. Just exchange requires trading equal value. But with usury, the lender receives more money or value than he gives.

Thomas Aquinas similarly condemns usury but offers different reasons. He, too, criticizes usury for not being an exchange of value for value—which justice requires. But he picks up on the rich-poor dynamics of lending, going so far as to say: "He who gives usury does not give it voluntarily simply, but under a certain necessity, in so far as he needs to borrow money which the owner is unwilling to lend without usury" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, "Treatises on the Virtues," Question 78). This fits the biblical or agricultural paradigm of borrowing being used only in dire circumstances. The concern seems to be about oppression and the lack of virtue in lending at interest.

Reformers like John Calvin took a broader view of usury. Calvin understood that money, along with clearly defined and protected property, was a tool men can avail themselves of to produce more. And producing more fulfilled the cultural mandate. Besides appreciating the prospect of productive loans, the Reformers also added nuance to what borrowing and lending consisted of—namely, it is actually a kind of purchase. In that case, principles of charity and justice apply rather than blanket prohibitions. Furthermore, when lending for a productive use, the lender shares in the fruit or profit of the enterprise when they receive interest.

One must consider the position of borrowers to avoid taking advantage of their situation or impoverishing them. But Calvin also thought it was possible for borrowers to defraud the lender if they had the means of repayment but chose not to repay. This was tantamount to theft. As Christians, he argued, we are primarily under the law of charity, both in terms of how we use our resources and in how we borrow and lend. He would have had no patience for loan sharks, payday lending, or high credit-card interest rates.

***Of Usury* (1494), a woodcut attributed to Albrecht Dürer**

## BORROWING AND LENDING IN 2023

Today Christians should consider the ethics and prudence of borrowing and lending. As borrowers, we should feel confident that debt is a legitimate tool for us to use prudently. I suggest we use the paradigm of productive debt versus unproductive debt. Productive debt increases our capabilities to work, create, steward, and bless others. Unproductive debt creates burdens, hardships, and reduces our ability to steward resources and bless others.

With debt you acquire an asset right away and then increase your "ownership" of it over time by paying off the debt. Borrowing to buy a house can be a productive use of debt if we are prudent: not taking out more debt than we can reasonably repay with our current and future job prospects or taking significant risk by borrowing the entire value of the house, which may decrease in value over time. Similarly, borrowing to buy or build housing for others can be another productive use of debt.

Borrowing money can also be justified when put toward other productive endeavors like starting a business or paying for education or for job certification. Often these loans have reasonable interest rates and repayment schedules. And most importantly, from a theological perspective, these kinds of loans can increase our capacity to carry out the cultural mandate and our means of loving our neighbors.

In contrast, unproductive borrowing tends to center on consumption and should generally be avoided. Most borrowing for consumption damages one's financial position—leaving us with fewer resources to share with or give to others. Borrowing for consumption is also usually economically unproductive. Buying a boat or new clothes or dining out are generally superfluous economic activities. This doesn't mean that owning or enjoying these things are necessarily sinful, but they are not part of the cultural mandate of creative production.

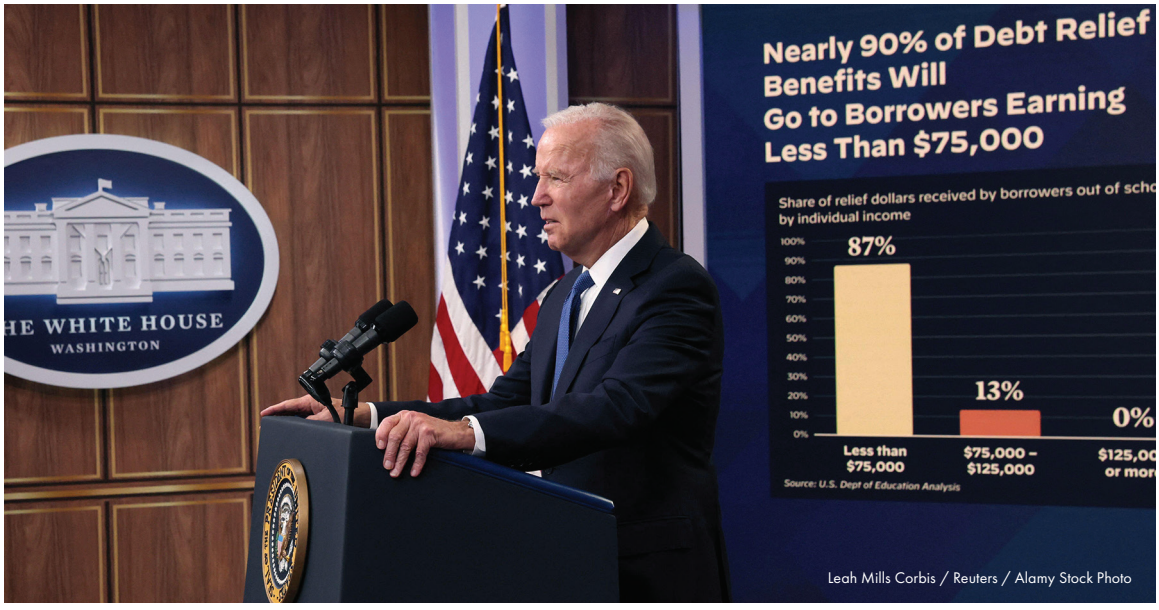
Of course, in rare or extreme cases, borrowing for consumption may be productive. After all, we need food and clothing and shelter in order to live and flourish. While there may be times, often because of misfortune, where we need to borrow to pay bills or to bridge a period of unemployment, such borrowing limits our capabilities. Our options for work, spending, and giving shrink because we have to service our debts. Borrowing for consumption can also amplify our passions and our appetites rather than our creative and productive capacities.

When it comes to lending, Christians need to exercise discernment. Lending at well above market rates should be scrutinized closely. Are we able to charge such a rate because someone is desperate or stuck? Are we their only option for funds? If so, we should remember the teaching of the Old Testament: Are we impoverishing a brother or friend when we should be aiding them? There is no simple rule for the diverse situations we might face.

After all, the risk of default may justify an unusually high rate of interest. But would offering someone a lower rate show more care? Should we offer the loan without interest? Or give the resources away entirely? Or could the loving thing involve *not* enabling the other person to spend more money? Answering such questions requires wisdom.

In the marketplace of impersonal exchange, however, there is greater latitude in what interest rates we may charge. I suppose, like gambling, Christians should generally avoid creating or working in payday or credit card or consumer debt businesses that deal primarily with unproductive borrowing by people in difficult circumstances. These kinds of businesses have little to do with expanding people's ability to create or to serve others. Instead, they tend to cater to people's appetites—or desperation—while ultimately reducing their options and capacity to love God and their neighbor.

So, how should Christians think about debt? As a powerful servant or a cruel master.




**President Biden delivers remarks about the student loan forgiveness program in October 2022**

Although I have focused on individual borrowing and lending, similar principles apply to government borrowing. Unfortunately, many politicians and governments borrow money to pay for consumption of various kinds, rather than for productive investment. This can hobble countries as their interest and debt payments crowd out other forms of public spending.

President Biden's proposal to forgive large sums of student debt provides an interesting test case. First, consider what the policy would do. It would "forgive" $10,000 (or even more) of someone's student debt—that is, money borrowed directly or indirectly from the government to pay for college. While that improves their financial position, it means that the lender (i.e., the federal government) will now receive that much less money from debt repayment. A loan has become a gift.

Now, in a private setting, if a lender chose to forgive someone's debt, we would consider it an act of charity. But this case is more complicated because the federal government is the lender and it represents the American people. Furthermore, it is only a couple of politicians deciding, on behalf of everyone, to make this "gift." And it will mean either higher taxes to compensate for less debt-repayment dollars or greater borrowing by the federal government. So we are warranted in asking: What does this policy *produce*? If the answer is not much, then we can lump this policy in with hundreds of others that create debt for consumption rather than production, further undermining the financial capacity of the nation's government.

## A TOOL, NOT A VICE

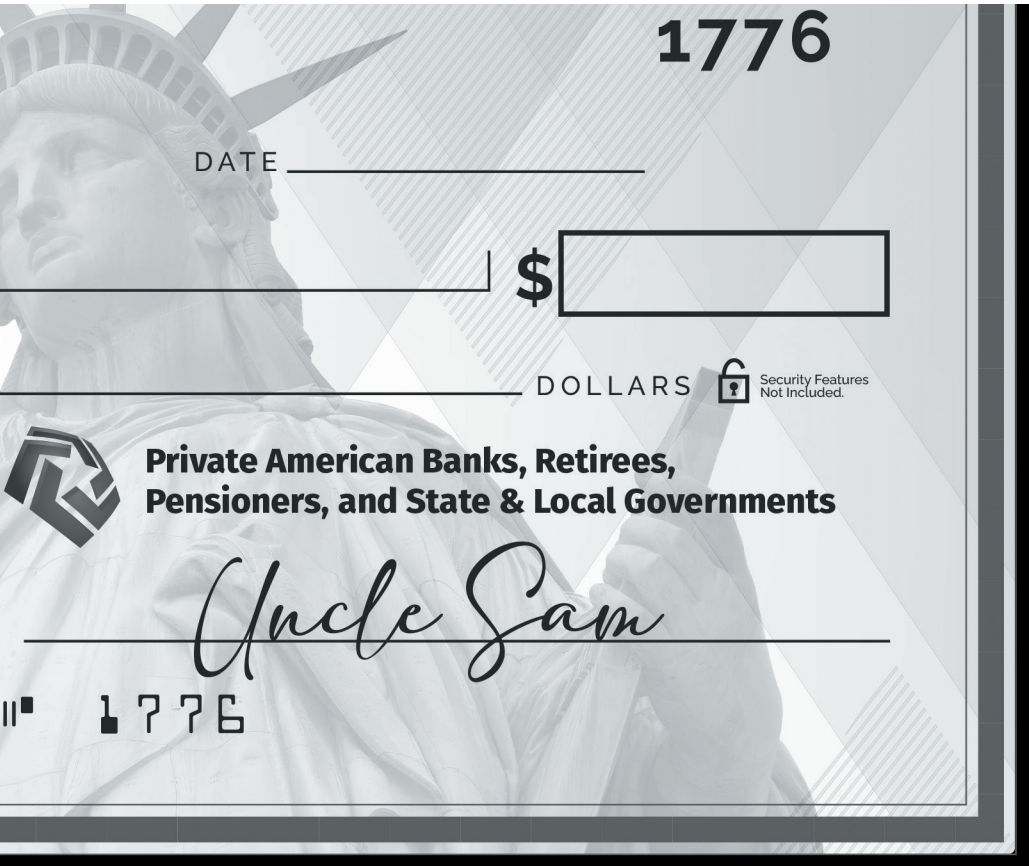
We should recognize lending and borrowing as potentially useful, not as inherently sinful. Rather, debt is a tool that can improve our stewardship or detract from it; that can bless others or take advantage of their situation. To shun this tool would be to close our eyes to a powerful means of advancing God's work on earth and for promoting human flourishing. But to embrace it unquestioningly sets the stage for our financial ruin or for our participation in the financial ruin of others.

And as with any tool, charity should rule along with prudence and wisdom. We can learn how to use debt better with time—just as you can get better at operating a machine or driving a vehicle with practice. Our borrowing should be for productive uses. And our lending should be tempered by charity and generosity. RL

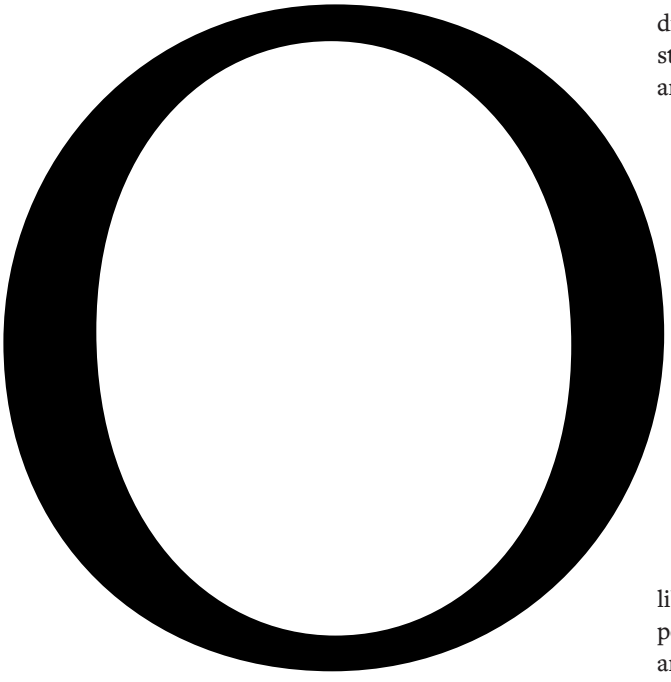
***Paul D. Mueller** is an associate professor of economics at The King's College in NYC and the author of* Ten Years Later: Why the Conventional Wisdom about the 2008 Financial Crisis Is Still Wrong.


# AMERICA IN DEBT: A SHORT HISTORY

**by SAMUEL GREGG**




We hear a lot about the national debt in figures that are unfathomable. But despite our "worry," the American electorate seems unwilling to pressure their representatives in Congress to do much about it, fearing deep cuts in programs that even conservatives seek to preserve.



**ON THE WEBSITE OF** the U.S. Department of the Treasury, there is a section entitled "Debt to the Penny." It reports the total debt of the U.S. government on a daily basis. Every so often it attracts some attention, invariably when the debt level passes some significant milestone.

In February 2023, for example, America's total public debt was more than $31 trillion. While this attracted some critical commentary, the topic quickly receded from public discussion. The reaction was similar when the national debt surged past the $20 trillion level back in September 2017. After considerable huffing and puffing about the event's historic character alongside much lamenting about government fiscal irresponsibility, the attention of most commentators and Americans more generally wandered elsewhere.

This pattern indicates that, despite polling indicating that most Americans are worried about the size of the country's public debt, it is not something that many Americans (let alone Congress) are anxious to tackle. That, I would suggest, tells us something about how America and the world has changed over the past 50 years, and in generally unhealthy ways.

## A USEFUL TOOL BUT EASILY ABUSED

Public debt—or, more precisely, sovereign debt—is different from private debt. For one thing, sovereign states are not businesses. Unlike private companies and individuals, for example, the U.S. government has a monopoly of the money supply in America. It is thus in a position to alter the terms of America's public debt in ways that private debtors cannot.

Economists have long argued about the economic effects of public debt. Back in 2010, the National Bureau of Economic Research published a paper suggesting that once a country's public debt exceeds 90% of annual GDP, it tends to experience lower growth. This ignited ferocious arguments among economists. On one level, the debates concerned the linearity of the relationship between debt and growth, the merits of particular economic predictions based on extrapolations from existing empirical data, as well as arguments about the likely direction of government economic policy. The polemics also arose from long-standing divisions among economists and others concerning the efficacy of public borrowing and government intervention more generally.

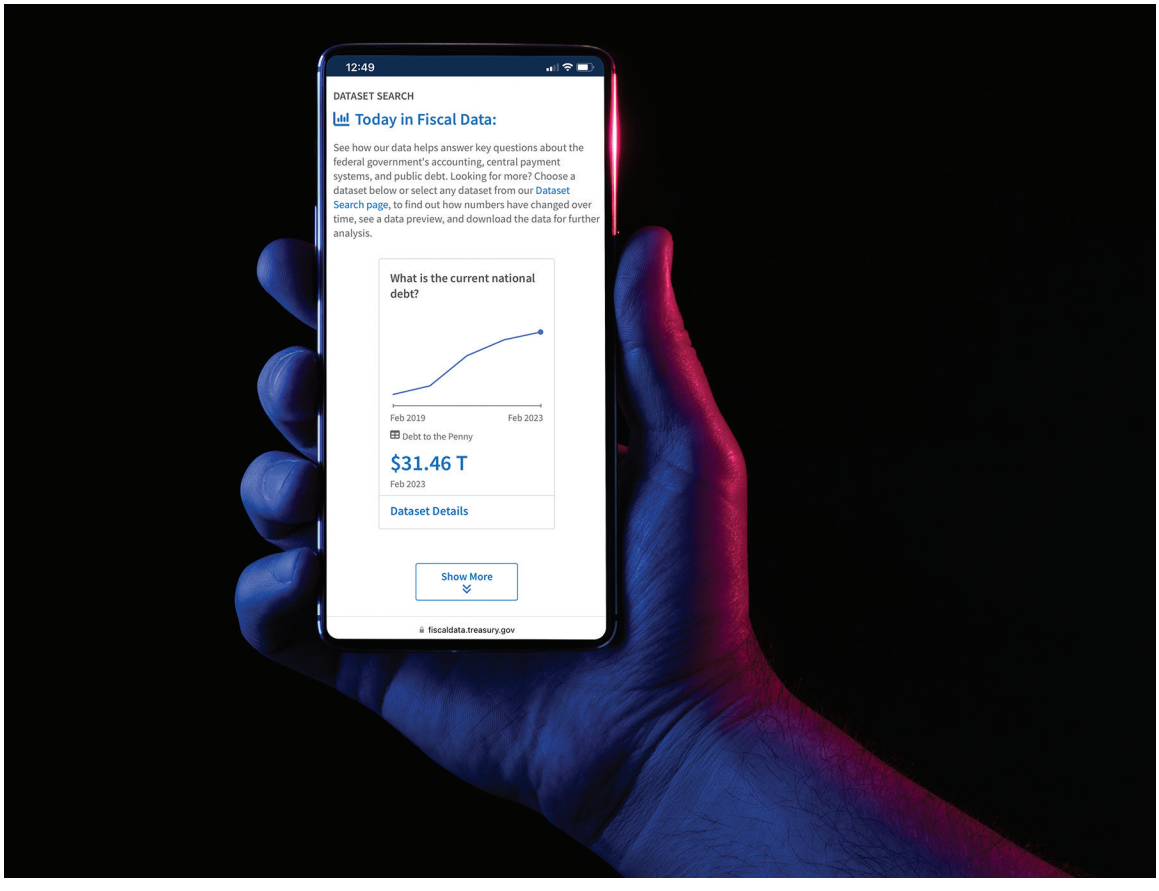
Often missing from these types of discussions is attention to the historical dimension. The U.S. public debt has always played an oversize role in America's history. The man who provided America with much of the financial architecture that it takes for granted today, Alexander Hamilton, famously described the establishment and successful management of a public debt in his 1790 First Report on Public Credit as a "national blessing." According to Hamilton, creating a national debt was essential if America was to attract foreign capital and become a commercial republic. With this credit established, Hamilton maintained, many Americans and foreigners would invest in

government securities. According to Hamilton, the consequent capital inflow would provide the fuel for a takeoff of the American economy.

At the same time, Hamilton considered instituting such a debt as key to forging unity among the hitherto disunited former British colonies. The creation of a national public debt helped, after all, to establish America as a sovereign entity that united the fractious states more tightly in the 1790s. Creating a national public debt also gave each state a common stake in the nation's public finances. That was one reason Hamilton wanted the federal government to assume responsibility for the states' Revolutionary War debts. He also saw implications for foreign policy. Britain's rise to world-leader power status in the 18th century, Hamilton held, owed much to its ability to manage its public debt, a task that its major rival, France, had conspicuously failed to accomplish.

Hamilton's plan had most of its anticipated economic effects. It helped, for instance, to establish America's public credit at home and abroad, and thereby attracted capital to a country desperately

“THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL PUBLIC DEBT HELPED TO ESTABLISH AMERICA AS A SOVEREIGN ENTITY THAT UNITED THE FRACTIOUS STATES MORE TIGHTLY IN THE 1790S.”




**A 1979 U.S. government $10,000 Treasury bond**

needing it. The stabilization of the price of government securities, for example, meant that wealthy Americans who had been reluctant to invest started doing so. Above all, foreign capital started surging into the United States, aided by the fact that war had broken out in Europe.

Over the next 150 years, that public debt enabled America to do some spectacular things. These ranged from purchasing 828,000 square miles of territory from Napoleon's France in 1803, to providing the financial muscle that helped the Allies crush Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War II.

Yet America's public debt was never envisaged as a means for papering over *ad infinitum* the fiscal gap that emerges when people want the federal government to expend immense sums regularly on various activities but don't want their taxes raised to pay for such endeavors.

Key Founders certainly understood the folly of using public debt in such a manner. "There is not a more important and fundamental principle in legislation than that the ways and means ought always to face the public engagements; that our appropriations should ever go hand in hand with our promises." James Madison spoke these words in a 1790 speech to Congress during contentious debates about whether the U.S. government should assume the states' considerable debts. Madison was seeking to remind Americans that balanced budgets are a basic element of sound public finance, and that public debt was not supposed to be a way of ignoring the importance of this axiom.

Likewise, in the same report in which Hamilton advocated the establishment of a national debt, he insisted that he "ardently wishes to see it incorporated as a fundamental maxim in the system of public credit of the United States that the creation of debt should always be accompanied with the means of extinguishing it." Furthermore, as noted by his most well-known biographer, Ron Chernow, Hamilton's warnings about excessive public debt "*vastly* outnumber his paeans to public debt as a source of liquid capital." In 1795, for instance, Hamilton described the progressive accumulation of debt as "perhaps the natural disease of all governments. And it is not easy to conceive anything more likely than this to lead to great and convulsive revolutions of Empire."

At the time, Hamilton was undoubtedly thinking of France. Beginning in the late 17th century, France decisively displaced Spain as Europe's most powerful country. France's military and administrative modernization was not, however, matched by the same degree of fiscal modernization. Instead of updating its archaic fiscal and taxation systems, successive

***Construction of a Dam* by William Gropper (1939), a New Deal–era mural commissioned by the federal government**

> **ABSENT MAJOR FISCAL REFORMS OR A LONG ECONOMIC BOOM, PRESSURES TO BORROW EVEN MORE WILL MAGNIFY AS AMERICA'S POPULATION CONTINUES TO AGE, ITS BIRTH RATE DECLINES, AND ITS SOCIAL SECURITY AND HEALTHCARE COSTS GROW.**

French kings used state debt to pay for wars in Europe and territorial expansion around the world in the 17th and 18th centuries. That included paying for France's involvement in the American Revolutionary War. This turned out to be climacteric.

In short, serious mismanagement of the nation's finances and the use of public debt to make up major shortfalls in income had brought the Bourbon monarchy to its knees. As Hamilton knew well, this had played a major role in the advent of the French Revolution. But as someone deeply read in history, Hamilton also surely had in mind how failure to control state debt had contributed to Imperial Spain's decline as a world power and, even further back, the deterioration in Rome's ability to govern its empire.

For the most part, a prudent approach to public debt generally prevailed throughout 19th-century America and well into the 20th century. Not coincidently, this was a time in which American presidents and legislators bragged about their successes at cutting state expenditures. The federal government regularly produced more annual surpluses than deficits. That helped keep the public debt quite low as a percentage of GDP.

Before 1980, Americans experienced only five comparatively brief periods of rising public debt levels. One was the result of Franklin Roosevelt's effort to stimulate an ailing American economy via the New Deal. The other four occasions involved the financing of major military engagements such as the Civil War and World War II. In these cases, however, successful efforts were immediately made by presidents and Congress to get federal spending under control in order to reduce the public debt once the emergency had passed.

This pattern reflects a mindset about the national debt that viewed it as a way of financing the federal government's efforts to address specific challenges as well as particular emergencies. It was never meant to become a type of permanent fiscal life support system for federal government spending. Alas, that is precisely what has happened to America.

## A DIFFERENT WORLD

In the 1980s, America entered a different world insofar as its public debt was concerned. America's public debt as a percentage of GDP started accelerating under Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, underwent a slight decline under Bill Clinton, and then escalated again under George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden.

The reasons for this trend are not complicated. During these decades, government spending was not reduced in real terms and the American economy did not enjoy spectacular economic growth. The United States also engaged in a major military buildup in the 1980s, fought wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. As if that were not enough, between 2008 and 2021, the federal government responded to a major financial crisis and a global pandemic by spending trillions of dollars.

We should keep in mind, however, that the key drivers of these expenditures that exceed income have been welfare programs rather than military and national defense spending. Something like 63% of the federal budget is allocated to mandatory spending, and this is overwhelmingly, as stated by the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities, on programs like "Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, federal military and civilian retirement, veteran's disability compensation, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [i.e., food stamps], and some farm price support programs." Another 8% is spent on interest payments.

Taken together, these baked-in numbers translate into ongoing massive federal government expenditures that regularly exceed government income from taxation. The primary way in which the United States has made up the difference has been to borrow—big time. The biggest foreign holders of U.S. treasury securities in October 2022 were, in order, Japan, China, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. Intragovernmental debt is also owed by the Treasury to other U.S. government agencies, like the Social Security Fund. But the biggest holder of U.S. public debt is the Federal Reserve, American banks and investors, mutual funds, pensions funds, insurance companies, holders of savings bonds, as well as state and local governments.

Absent major fiscal reforms or a long economic boom, pressures to borrow even more will magnify as America's population continues to age, its birth rate declines, and its Social Security and healthcare costs grow. In fact, America is *already* borrowing to make interest payments on the national debt. In July 2021, the Congressional Budget Office warned that America was on pace to see interest payments becoming the federal budget's fastest-growing segment. Nor can we assume that interest rates will stay low. In fact, the more America borrows, the more likely it is that interest rates will increase.

Another problem is that if America's national debt continues growing at its present pace, it will become a major drag on growth. Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell summarized the situation well when he told Congress in January 2022: "Debt is not at an unsustainable level, but the path is unsustainable—meaning it's growing faster than the economy, meaningfully faster than the economy." The growth of such debt is likely to increase the price of capital and thereby start crowding out private-sector investment in the economy, not to mention public-sector investment in activities such as national defense that are unquestionably the state's responsibility.

## AMERICA'S STRUGGLE TO REDUCE ITS DEBT

All this points to a hard question with a disturbing answer. In the past, America was able to get its public debt back under control. Why do we struggle to do so today?

One reason is that legislators, including many conservatives, have few incentives to do so. Diminishing the public debt today through real spending cuts would mean real reductions in ongoing big-ticket federal programs—income security, Social Security, Medicare, etc. Selling that to the millions of Americans—including many conservative Americans—who benefit from one or more of these outlays is politically very difficult. Americans may be willing to acknowledge America's public debt as a problem in generic terms and say that something must be done in theory; but they are far less willing to entertain proposals for debt reduction that might impact programs that directly benefit themselves or those they know and love.

> "FOR ALL THEIR GOVERNMENT-SKEPTIC RHETORIC, AMERICANS HAVE BECOME HABITUATED TO THE STATE'S PERMANENTLY UNDERTAKING MANY ACTIVITIES THAT GO FAR BEYOND ANY REASONABLE CONCEPTION OF LIMITED GOVERNMENT."

Indeed, even many self-described fiscal conservatives have proved unwilling to embrace *real* spending cuts as part of any effort to reduce public debt. It is not uncommon, for instance, for legislators to stress their efforts to cut the projected rate of increase in government spending. But that, to put it bluntly, is *not* a reduction in real spending. It is simply reducing the *pace* of increases in government expenditures.

Nor is it hard to find examples of American representatives and senators who denounce out-of-control

spending and excessive public debt but don't hesitate to lobby for subsidies for politically well-connected businesses located in their electorates. This isn't surprising. If legislators believe their reelection depends upon their ability to deliver taxpayer dollars to their state or district, and if their electorates consider this part of their representatives' job, we should not be shocked at their aversion to putting in place specific measures designed to diminish public debt.

From this standpoint, we start to see that, for all their government-skeptic rhetoric, Americans have become habituated to the state's permanently undertaking many activities that go far beyond any reasonable conception of limited government. Even worse, Americans are reluctant to acknowledge the cost. Hence, America lacks a critical mass of citizens disposed to take the long-term view and support the hard decisions that would enable America to rein in its national debt and return that debt to the purposes for which it was intended. Any meaningful change requires enough Americans deciding that they really do want less government in their lives, and then acting accordingly.

All this analysis points to an unpalatable political fact. Unless enough *citizens* in a democracy are willing to support the difficult choices that enable nations to bring public debt under control, the chances that legislators and governments will do so is small.

Herein we confront a major political problem, one highlighted by the German economist Wilhelm Röpke, the intellectual architect of West Germany's economic liberalization in 1948 and its subsequent rise to become Europe's economic powerhouse. In a 1958 essay, Röpke observed that there is nothing in the welfare state's basic conception to set internal limits on its growth. Moreover, if democracy degenerates into politicians competing for votes on the basis of who is considered better at delivering the most government-provided economic security for the most people, the welfare state's continual increase is guaranteed, while the question of how to pay for it becomes a very secondary concern. In such circumstances, no one should be surprised that legislators revert to using public debt as a way of paying for expanding welfare programs without asking for tax increases.

**Economist Wilhelm Röpke, Geneva, 1959**

Photo by ullstein bild Dtl. / Getty Images


A bronze statue of Adam Smith by Alexander Stoddart at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh

## A QUESTION OF TRUST

At the foundation of the workability of public debt is a very basic principle: that creditors should and would receive what they were owed. If investors are confident that government securities will be repaid in full, then they will invest. Thus, what truly matters is *trust* that the government will make good on its repayments. As Hamilton put it, "Opinion is the soul of it."

Such confidence is only a question of investors calculating that the United States is very likely to meet its debt obligations. At the heart of its ability to do this, and therefore successfully maintain America's national debt, is the issue of trust and the willingness to fulfill certain moral commitments. As Hamilton wrote, "considerations of still greater authority" applicable to sovereign debt questions are directly derived from what Hamilton called "immutable principles of moral obligation"—in short, a willingness to fulfill *promises*.

If there is anything that needs to be injected into our contemporary discussion of national debt, it is precisely the language of responsibility and obligation. One thing that financial history certainly teaches us is that many governments have, at best, mixed track records regarding their willingness to meet the obligations that underpin national debt. Over 200 years ago, Adam Smith noted in his *Wealth of Nations* that

> when national debts have once been accumulated to a certain degree, there is scarce…a single instance of their having been fairly and completely paid. The liberation of the public revenue, if it has ever been brought about at all, has always been brought about by a bankruptcy: sometimes by an avowed one, but always by a real one, though frequently by a pretended payment.

Among other things, Smith was thinking here of currency devaluations. These, he maintained, benefited "the idle and profuse debtor at the expense of the industrious and frugal creditor." While the original promise's formal structure was maintained, governments used their power over the money supply to unilaterally alter the terms of agreements with creditors.

This isn't a peculiarly modern insight. Reacting to the habit of medieval monarchs debasing their currencies to reduce state debt, the French bishop

**An illustration of Nicole Oresme (c. 1320–1382), from the first page of his book *Traité de l'espère***

and theologian Nicole Oresme of Lisieux claimed in his *Tractatus de origine, natura, iure et mutationibus monetarum* (1355) that such debasements were usually unjust because they allowed governments to avoid paying what they really owed. Echoing these concerns two centuries later, the Spanish Jesuit Juan de Mariana observed that many governments resorted to currency debasements to avoid making the cuts in public expenditure often needed to get public debt under control.

In our time, we have seen sovereign debt faults in countries ranging from Argentina (2001) and Venezuela (2017) to Russia (2020), Lebanon (2020), and Zambia (2020). The economic damage was considerable and regrettable in the case of the citizens of these countries. The other form of damage was reputational. This, however, is appropriate because gross violations of trust merit such a response. It also reaffirms the principle that promises should, all other things being equal, be kept, regardless of whether the debtor is a government, a business, or an individual.

This does not mean that governments should routinely sacrifice societies on the altar of debt repayment. It does mean, however, that Americans need to think far more seriously about the moral and legal obligations that underpin public debt.

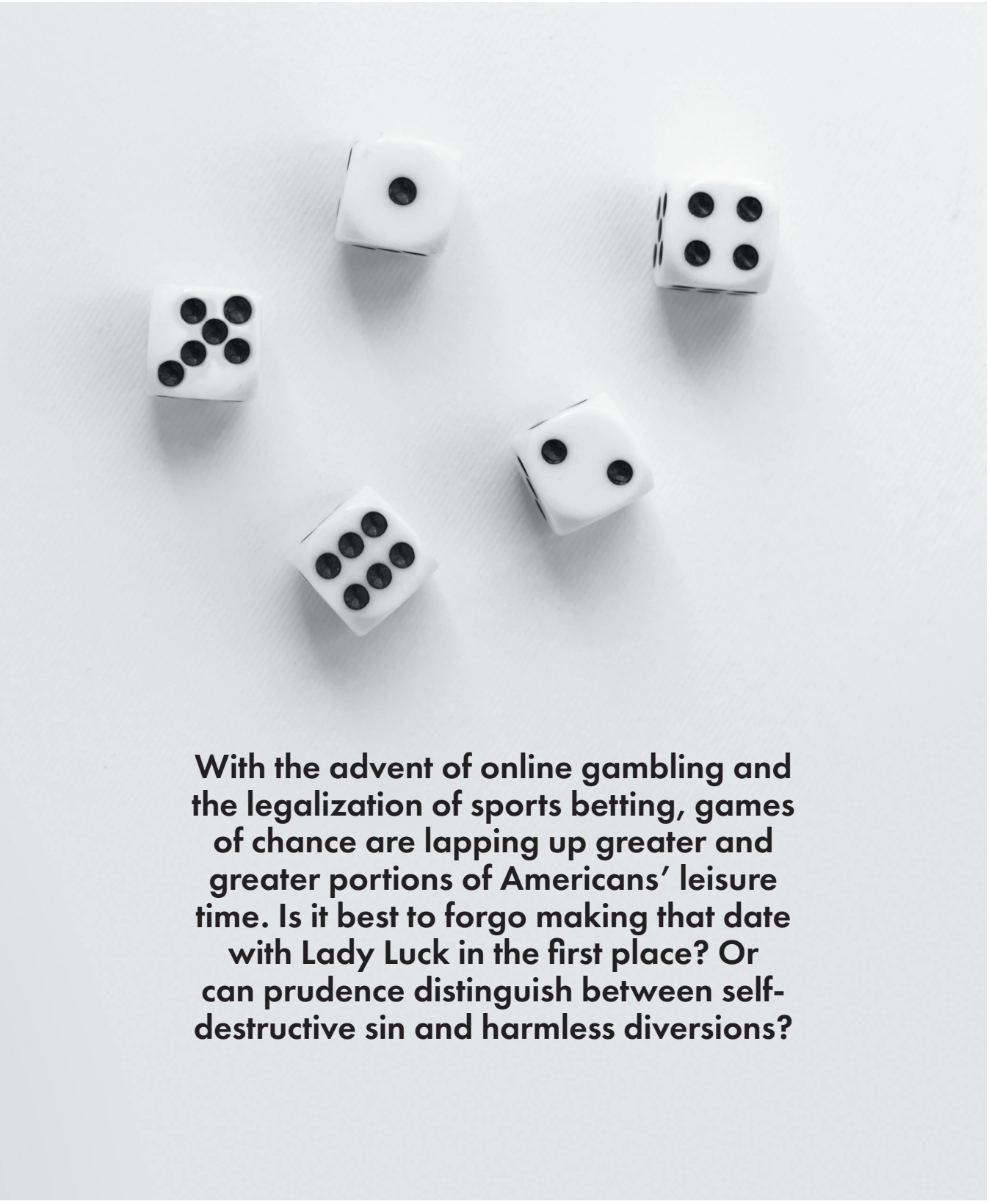
Politics, it is often said, is the art of the possible. This is certainly true. But thinking about the possible is not a blank check for American legislators and citizens to ignore the challenges associated with the growth in America's public debt. Yes, addressing these questions is difficult. Nevertheless, as Hamilton's greatest political opponent, Thomas Jefferson, insisted: "We must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt. We must make our election between economy and liberty, or profusion and servitude."

Unless we understand the need to be clear-eyed about America's national debt and its present dysfunctionalities, I am confident that Americans will be revisiting this conversation in a few years' time when America's national debt hits the $40 trillion mark. That will be as much a sign of deep inertia in the American body politic as it will be an indication of fiscal apathy and negligence. And we will have only ourselves to blame. RL

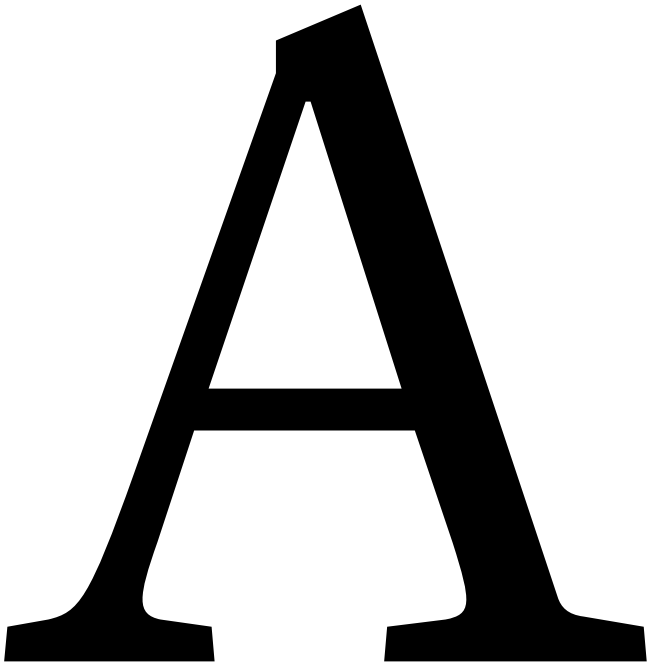
***Samuel Gregg** is Distinguished Fellow in Political Economy and Senior Research Faculty at the American Institute for Economic Research and an affiliate scholar at the Acton Institute.*

# WHAT DOES IT PROFIT? GAMBLING AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

by JORDAN J. BALLOR



**With the advent of online gambling and the legalization of sports betting, games of chance are lapping up greater and greater portions of Americans' leisure time. Is it best to forgo making that date with Lady Luck in the first place? Or can prudence distinguish between self-destructive sin and harmless diversions?**



**ANYONE WHO HAS TUNED** in to a sporting event in the past year or so has been subject to the nearly ubiquitous advertisements for sports gambling in one form or another. That's certainly the case in the six states that allow online casino gambling, the seven states with online state-sanctioned lotteries, and the 26 states that allow mobile sports betting.

While gambling isn't quite the world's oldest profession, games of chance and wagers have been around for quite some time. As we live in a culture that is increasingly awash in digital opportunities to amuse ourselves to debt, what should we make of and sports betting? The dissonance for a Christian

"THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS ITSELF SEEMS TO VALIDATE AT LEAST SOME FORMS OF WAGERING OR ANCIENT ANALOGUES TO GAMES OF CHANCE."

in this cultural moment is particularly acute, as our postmodern neopagan world more and more mirrors the bread and circuses of the early Church's context in the Roman Empire.

It would perhaps be easy enough and wise as well to simply abjure all such worldly temptations offered by scantily clad ambassadors for the thrill of acquiring vast riches through a few taps on a phone screen. The Christian tradition certainly stands in clear opposition to the fomenting of vices like greed and pride. But the debates in Christian history over the status of lotteries, betting, and similar activities are much more complex than a simple binary of absolute affirmation or negation. This is, in part, because the scriptural witness itself seems to validate at least some forms of wagering or ancient analogues to games of chance.

## CASTING LOTS IN THE BIBLE

To be sure, Scripture does not sanction, nor even directly address, gambling for money, especially in its modern form. But there are instances where something like an instrument of chance is used, particularly in relationship to the challenge of discerning God's will.

The Urim and Thummim were sacred objects employed in the Mosaic dispensation, recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Their exact nature is unclear, and there has been a great deal of speculation about their appearance and how they were used, but they are sometimes referred to as "the sacred lots" (Deut. 33:8 NLT). They are usually understood by scholars

to refer to some kind of device by which the will of God could be determined on a particular question. In this sense they are a special case of the phenomenon of casting lots described in the Bible.

The technical term for the use of lots to discern God's will is *cleromancy*, but it essentially refers to a process by which the priests or leaders might inquire of God and receive a sign of divine determination. Lots were cast in the Bible within a providentialist worldview; as the Proverb puts it, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33). There is no hint in this context of some powerful metaphysical force like luck, fortune, or chance. Rather, lots are a mechanism intended to bridge the gap between the reality of God's will and human ignorance of that will. Rather than reflecting some kind of belief in a cosmic capriciousness or chance, lots are a means of addressing an epistemic deficit.

The use of lots in the ancient near east is well-established, and there is extensive precedent for their use in ancient Israel and into the times of the apostles. Lots were to be used by the Aaronic high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:8). Joshua used lots to determine the inheritance of tribes during the conquest of Canaan (Josh. 18:8). Lots were also used to determine inheritances and the division of property when there was uncertainty about the rightful claims or divine will concerning material provision.

Lots were also employed in other circumstances, including the designation of different divisions for different periods of priestly service (1 Chron. 24:5). It is in this context that we read in the New Testament that Zechariah was serving as a priest, and "he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense" (Luke 1:9). This is where an angel foretells the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah. Later in the New Testament era, lots are used to discern which of two candidates, Barsabbas or Matthias, is to take the place of the traitor Judas among the apostles. The account concludes, "They cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:26).

In John's Gospel we read that Psalm 22:18—"They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots"—was fulfilled when Roman soldiers divided up the spoils following Jesus' crucifixion, and

**Casting lots for tribal inheritance, woodcut for Die Bibel in Bildern, 1860**

*Samson and Delilah* (1887) by Jose Etxenagusia

> **AUGUSTINE LIKENS GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL ORDERING OF HUMANKIND AND DETERMINATION OF WHERE PEOPLE LIVE IN RELATIONSHIP TO ONE ANOTHER AS A KIND OF CHANCE.**

rather than tearing apart the seamless tunic, "cast lots for it to see whose it shall be" (John 19:24). Much of the later Christian reflection on gambling, wagering, luck, and chance are grounded in reception of these generally licit uses of lots to discern God's will.

There are a few notable instances of something akin to betting or competition in Scripture as well. As recounted in Genesis (32:22–32), Jacob has a wrestling match with a mysterious man. Although there are no explicit stakes in the contest, Jacob earns a blessing, a new name, and a permanent limp for his striving. Later in the time of the judges, Samson wagers with 30 Philistines that they cannot solve his riddle: "Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet." The stakes are 30 sets of clothing and linen garments, and Samson loses the gamble due to the duplicity of his Philistine wife. Although Samson is a judge of Israel and a hero of the faith named in Hebrews 11, his actions are not typically understood as positive models for moral behavior, however.

## THE FATHERS ON FORTUNE

Among the church fathers, the strong providentialist perspective is upheld against an essentially pagan understanding of chance or fortune. And when something like luck or fortune is invoked, it functions as an epistemological rather than an ontological claim. Thus, for instance, Augustine likens God's providential ordering of humankind and determination of where people live in relationship to one another as, from a human perspective, a kind of chance. In articulating the doctrine of subsidiarity in seminal form, Augustine writes that "all men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you." These accidental relationships are to be understood as reflective of a kind of divine providential establishment: "Since you cannot consult for the good of them all, you must take the matter as decided for you by a sort of lot, according as each man happens for the time being to be more closely connected with you."

Augustine's understanding of divine providence is in sharp contrast to the pagans' posture toward their own gods. Such gods have a realm of influence and power, and must be appeased so that their favor might be granted to human beings. But the relationship is always transactional and instrumental, and indeed, from the human point of view, fundamentally capricious and arbitrary. As Lactantius writes, Fortune is "a goddess mocking the affairs of men with various casualties, because they know not from what source things good and evil happen to them. They think that they are brought together to do battle with her; nor do they assign any reason by whom and on what account they are thus matched; but they only boast that they are every moment carrying on a contest for life and death with fortune." He goes on to define fortune as "the sudden and unexpected occurrence of accidents," whether positive or negative, but where the pagans ascribe these accidents to the caprice of their gods, Christians know that "fortune is nothing" and that "all the wisdom of man consists in this alone, the knowledge and worship of God."

Clement of Alexandria articulated a balanced and nuanced perspective on wealth and its proper administration. "Riches," he says, "which benefit also our neighbours, are not to be thrown away. For they are possessions, inasmuch as they are possessed, and goods, inasmuch as they are useful and provided by God for the use of men; and they lie to our hand, and are put under our power, as material and instruments which are for good use to those who know the instrument." Material fortunes, then, are not to be derided or cast aside as of no importance. Wealth and fortune can be put to good use in the service of others. But they are not to be sought solely for their own sake or used as a substitute for higher goods, and certainly not the highest good, God himself. The internal and spiritual state of the Christian is of primary concern, whether in riches or in poverty. "So also a poor and destitute man," warns Clement, "may be found intoxicated with lusts; and a man rich in worldly goods temperate, poor in indulgences, trustworthy, intelligent, pure, chastened."

## SCHOLASTIC DISTINCTIONS

The right use of riches remained a consistent theme of Christian reflection on wealth throughout the Middle Ages. For Aquinas, profits made from games of chance are treated along with wealth gained from prostitution and simony. In his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, as in his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas makes distinctions between participants in games of chance, especially whether someone has been taken advantage of in the relationship. He treats gambling profits in the context of whether such money can licitly be given as alms. "The winnings themselves of gamblers are prohibited by law," writes Thomas, but given that this is not always enforced or can be permitted given different cultural contexts, he goes on to distinguish between winnings from people who cannot lawfully lose their own property (e.g., minors), and those who can. In the latter case, the civil law of the land must be taken into account as well as the requirements of divine law. "If one has played with someone who has the power to dispose of what is his, if he is drawn into the game and loses, he can seek restitution," writes Aquinas, because he has been taken advantage of by someone like a professional swindler. If the one drawn into the game by the swindler wins, however, "he is not bound to return the winnings; for the man who has lost is not worthy to receive, nor can he licitly keep; unless positive law were abrogated anywhere by the opposite custom."

Aquinas, along with other medieval scholastics, was keen to explore the nuances of the relationships involved in various endeavors. With respect to what to do with money gained from gambling and games of chance, the moral judgment turns on the details of

the positive law of the land, the relationship between the participants, and the larger moral context. If someone were to win money illicitly from someone else, either because that person was taken advantage of by reason of age or intelligence, or someone gambles "with the desire of making money out of another man, entices him to play, and wins from him by cheating," that money is taken unjustly and ought to be returned to the person it is taken from. It therefore cannot be given lawfully as alms to someone else. The positive civil law, following the Justinian code, prohibits such profits altogether, albeit typically without further civil penalty beyond the duty to restore what has been lost. But it is possible that there are situations where that law has fallen into disuse or a contrary custom prevails. In such cases, direct restitution may not be required, and almsgiving out of such gain is always the better course.

## THE USES AND ABUSES OF LOTS

The Protestant Reformers generally took a jaundiced view toward gambling and games of chance. Luther distinguished gains from gambling from the technical injunctions against usury, but such gains were not without moral taint: "Money won by gambling is not usury either; yet it is not won without self-seeking, self-love, and sin." Such activities were outlawed in Geneva (along with other morally dubious activities such as dancing, masquerading, and bawdiness), and one traveler at the time observes that "games of chance are not customary" in the Reformation city. For Calvin it was essential to discern the proper use of something from its abuse. In the case of lots, he deems it entirely legitimate for civil authorities to use lots to determine the distribution of some good where there is no other just option for deciding ownership. "Those men who think it to be wickedness to cast lots at all, offend partly through ignorance, and partly they understand not the force of this word," writes Calvin. "There is nothing which men do not corrupt with their boldness and vanity, whereby it is come to pass that they have brought lots into great abuse and superstition. For that divination or conjecture which is made by lots is altogether devilish. But when magistrates divide provinces among them, and brethren their inheritance, it is a thing lawful."

The most substantial and influential work concerning lots, lotteries, and chance more generally was penned by the Puritan divine Thomas Gataker

An excerpt from the first book of the Code of Justinian (c. 528–534)

(1574–1654). His 1619 treatise, *Of the Nature and Use of Lots*, sought to discern the proper use of such activities from their abuse and corruption. Like Calvin, Gataker thought that Scripture clearly sanctioned such devices within certain limits. "The use of lots and lottery, as it is very ancient, so has been in all ages no less frequent among men of all sorts," writes Gataker. "And considering that those things that are most in use are by means of man's corruption most subject to abuse, it ought not to seem strange if the like has among the rest befallen lots, if having been so much in use, they have not been free from abuse." The legitimate use of lots, as Gataker understood and applied the Christian teaching, had to do with matters of uncertainty or doubt. They could be licitly used to make a determination where there was some epistemic shortfall on the part of humanity. Thus, asserts Gataker, a lot is an "event purposely applied to the deciding of some doubt." For Gataker, where there is some element of skill or human technique involved, then the device ceases to be a lot or lottery. Lotteries are, from the human side, mechanisms of pure chance. And their purpose is to provide some determination in a matter of doubt or uncertainty. Where there is no other rational or just means of determining ownership, for example, or for distributing some good, then appropriately constructed lotteries can be used as a means of determining just distribution.

## STATE LOTTERIES AND CHRISTIAN SOCIAL TEACHING

As moral theological reflection developed along with technical devices in the centuries following the Reformation, Christian engagement with gambling, games of chance, lotteries, and the like became increasingly sophisticated. The 19th-century Thomist moral theologian and Roman Catholic clergyman John J. Elmendorf judged that "bets, gambling, lotteries are not immoral per se, as contracts, but through attendant evils." Similarly, the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church teaches that "games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement."

Hewing closely to the examples given in scripture, the Christian tradition had long held that it was legitimate for authorities, particularly civil authorities, to use lots to distribute goods in the absence of other


**A 2021 Powerball and Mega Millions billboard in St. Louis**

reasonable means of discerning just allotment. But as state powers grew more robust and ingenious in the 19th and 20th centuries, the public regulation and promotion of gambling became more and more significant. The arguments for the state monopolization of lotteries are twofold. First, private lotteries and numbers games are inherently subject to abuse, and so if people are going to participate in them, it is better for them to be run by trustworthy and disinterested authorities. And second, and somewhat in conflict with the first rationale, the profits from public lotteries will be put to good use as a contribution to the common good. In many cases, for example, the profits from state lotteries are earmarked to support public education. This incentivizes governments to promote gambling as a kind of public service.

The popularity of such state-sponsored and promoted gambling is tremendous. Forty-five of the 50 states have government lotteries (Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah are the holdouts). In addition, there are two major lottery systems—Mega Millions and Powerball—that operate across states and are functionally nationwide. State lotteries have become a kind of inversion of the traditional Christian sanction of lotteries. Where the civil authorities previously had a kind of monopoly on legitimate use of lotteries to determine the just distribution of goods in exceptional cases, modern states have promoted gambling itself as a kind of civic virtue and a form of public service.

## ONLINE GAMBLING AND SPORTS BETTING

With the advance of information technology and portable digital devices for accessing the internet, the pace and sophistication of gambling and betting techniques have grown exponentially. In recent years numerous states have not only promoted gambling through their own state-run lotteries; they have


**Odds boards at a Las Vegas sportsbook**

increasingly legalized access to gambling through other entities, particularly digital sportsbooks and casinos. Bets can be placed on card games and other games of chance through mobile apps, and wagers can be placed on sporting events ranging from basketball and football to soccer and hockey.

While nothing like a sports betting app on a cellphone could be imagined by the moral theologians of previous centuries, the wisdom of Christian moral reflection on gambling does have some significant lessons to teach us as we attempt to grapple with rapidly changing cultural mores and legal norms. There are at least three important aspects of gambling that bear on new digital realities.

First, incentives, motivations, and relationships matter. We know this both from economics as well as the moral and theological analysis of economic transactions. It would be hard to argue that for-profit casinos and online sportsbooks are operating out of altruism or charity. Rather, these enterprises ultimately trade on a very simple proposal: Put some of your money at risk and you might win more, in some cases much more, than you risked. The house always wins is a truism for a reason, and the motivations of people opening up an app to place a bet or pressing the max bet option on a slot machine might be varied, but there should be no illusions about who is trying to profit from whom. In this way, sportsbooks and casinos might be standing in a somewhat better moral position relative to state-promoted gambling enterprises that masquerade as forms of public service.

Second, and deriving from considerations of the incentives at work, is the question of inducement. Theological considerations rightly focus on the status of those who are at the most risk for abuse, oppression, or mistreatment. Where the stronger overpowers the weaker, the Christian moral tradition brings its prophetic energy to bear on the side of the victimized and the downtrodden. This is why Aquinas is concerned that restitution is the proper response to loss when someone has been cheated in a game of chance or has otherwise been mistreated or misled. The sophistication and finesse of marketing in the gambling world is remarkable, and Christians must develop the virtues to resist powerful inducements to engage in risky behavior.

The question of skill is also relevant for a moral evaluation of gambling, betting, and games of chance. Not all forms of gambling are created equal in this sense. From a merely human standpoint, there is

always an element of chance or luck involved in how things turn out, whether in sports, in cards, or in life. Christians understand these factors to be a matter of divine providence and in some real sense beyond human control or influence. Who but God can ultimately account for how a football bounces? But there are games that are more or less absolutely about randomness and contests that are more or less dependent on the skill and abilities of human participants. Poker is not the same as roulette in this regard, and football is not the same as Powerball.

## WHAT DOES IT PROFIT?

In teaching his followers about the relative valuation of temporal and eternal goods, Jesus asks, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). A modern adaptation of this question might run something like this: What good is it for you to hit that 3-leg parlay and lose your spiritual life?

There are clear moral and spiritual risks to betting material goods on games of chance. Our hearts can be so set on acquiring more and more that we lose perspective of what is truly important. Perhaps in his own way, Satan is offering us some version of "the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Matt. 4:8) through our smartphones. There is clearly, then, much to lose from gambling, losses that exceed merely material and economic realities.

So abstention might well be the wisest course of action. At the same time, God has created human beings as creatures that are fitted for play as well as work. C.S. Lewis once observed that it is inevitable that Christians will rest and play, and it is therefore of utmost importance to discern where such rest and play might be undertaken innocently and without sin. Christian engagement with something like gambling, which seems to have a narrow and yet potentially licit moral scope, is in this way a particular version of the question of how a Christian is to relate to the world and culture more broadly. Certainly there are real dangers and existential threats to living in this world and in this culture. But can the responsible response truly be wholesale withdrawal?

In a particular and individual case, the answer can be yes. Alcoholics must abstain from drinking. Pornography is in every case immoral. And the same kinds of moral considerations have led preachers and theologians to denounce games of chance, theater, television, and many other forms of cultural

"THERE ARE CLEAR MORAL AND SPIRITUAL RISKS TO BETTING MATERIAL GOODS ON GAMES OF CHANCE."

expression throughout history. But if gambling even in some limited sense is not to be intrinsically denounced as immoral, then keen judgment becomes even more necessary for discerning its proper use.

And this is precisely where questions of responsible discipleship and Christian stewardship come to the fore. It turns out that, given the vagaries of human psychology, how we acquire money influences how we treat it. Our motivations here are critically important. Are we engaging in gambling, buying lottery tickets, or putting $50 on the Detroit Lions to make the playoffs next year simply as a kind of innocent form of play? Or are we really and truly focused on getting a hit of dopamine from winning or how we might spend the winnings on ourselves?

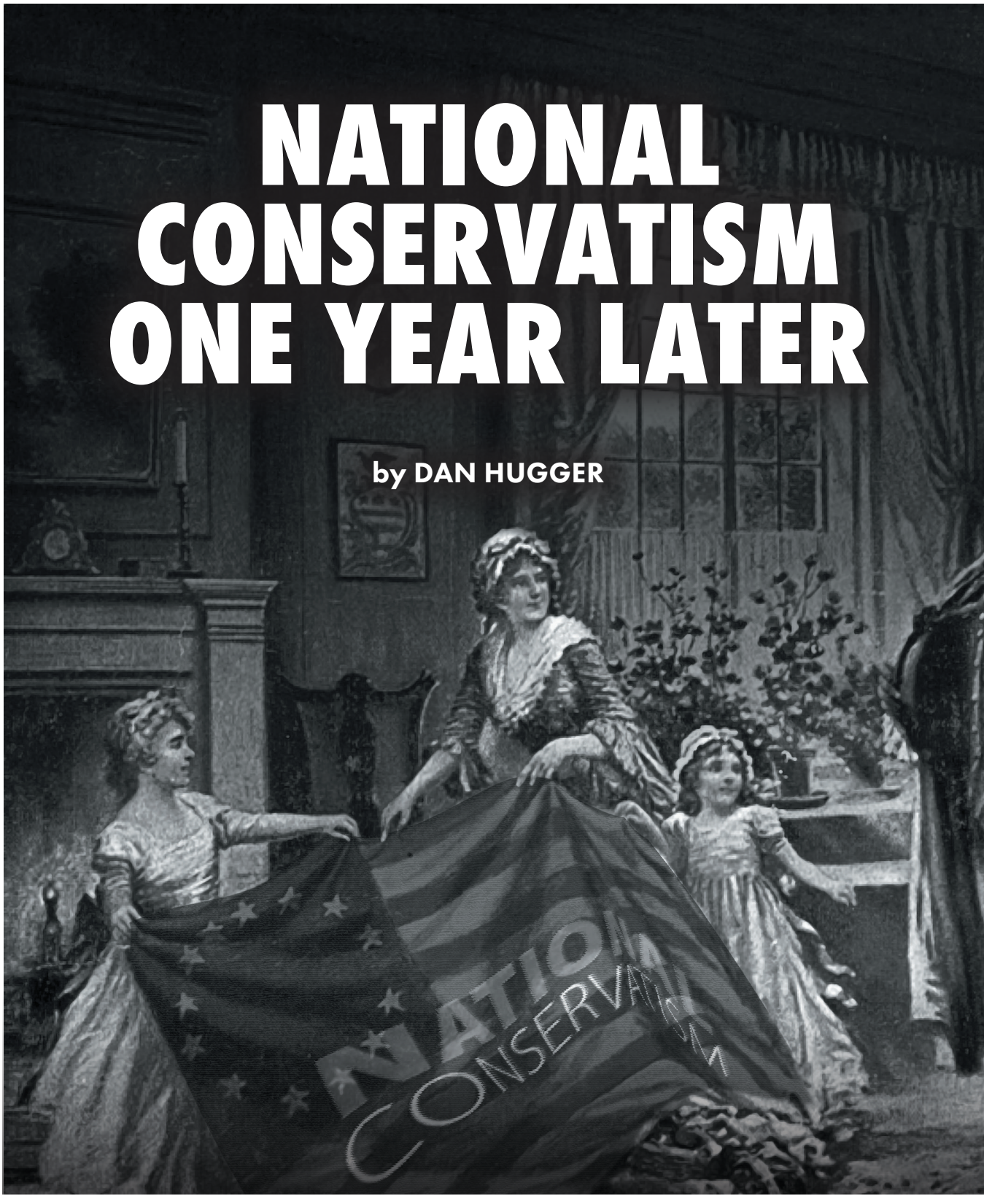
"The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils," the apostle warns us. "It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves" (1 Tim. 6:10). Gambling may in some instances be morally permissible, but it is always dangerous. Grappling responsibly with these kinds of dilemmas and temptations is a constant feature of life in this fallen world. As Augustine lamented, "When I am in trouble I long for good fortune, but when I have good fortune I fear to lose it. Is there any middle state between prosperity and adversity, some state in which human life is not a trial?"

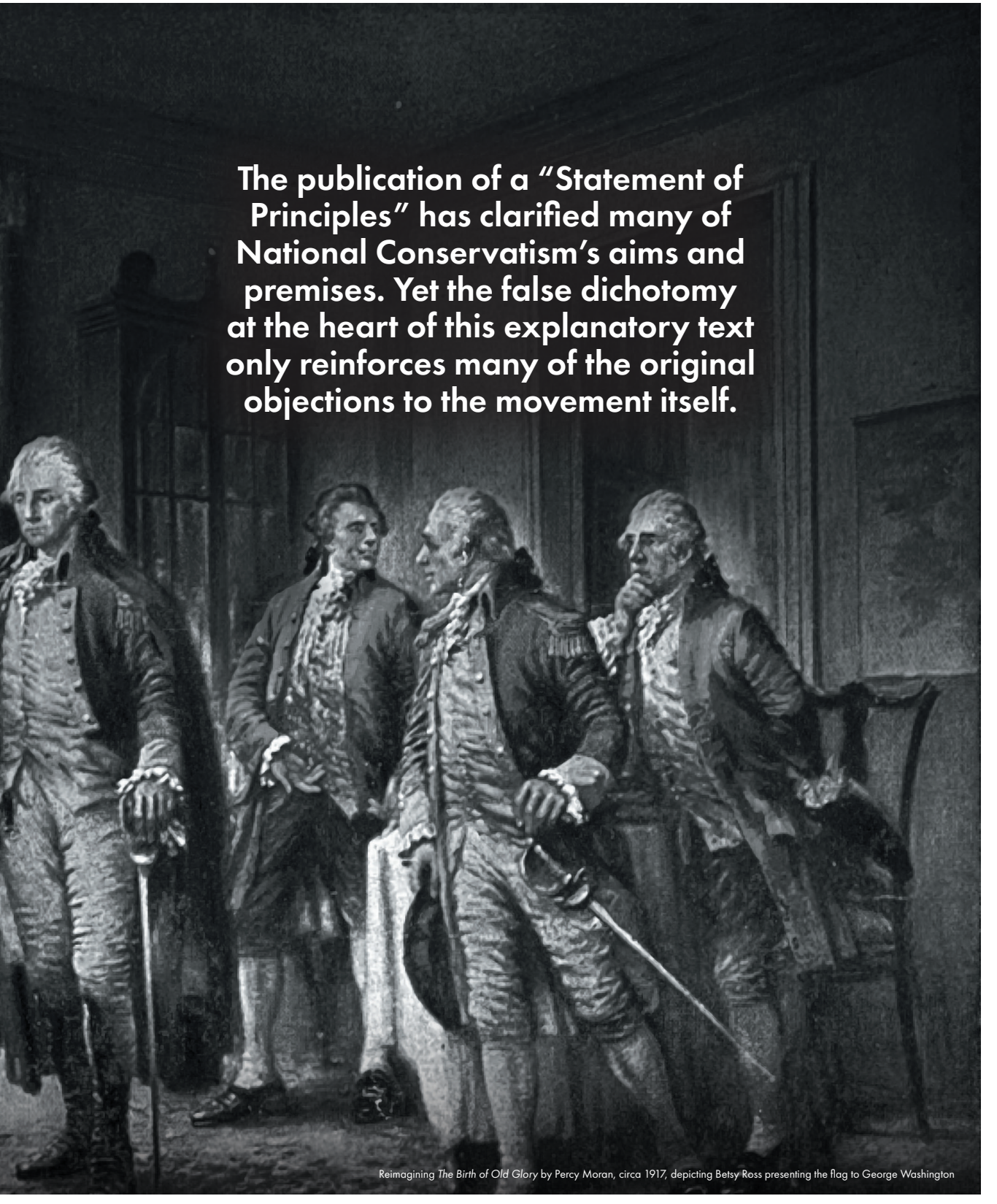
We might, in response to these realities, take some biblical wisdom to heart and ask for "neither poverty nor riches" (Prov. 30:8). And we might think twice before placing that bet. RL

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

# NATIONAL CONSERVATISM ONE YEAR LATER

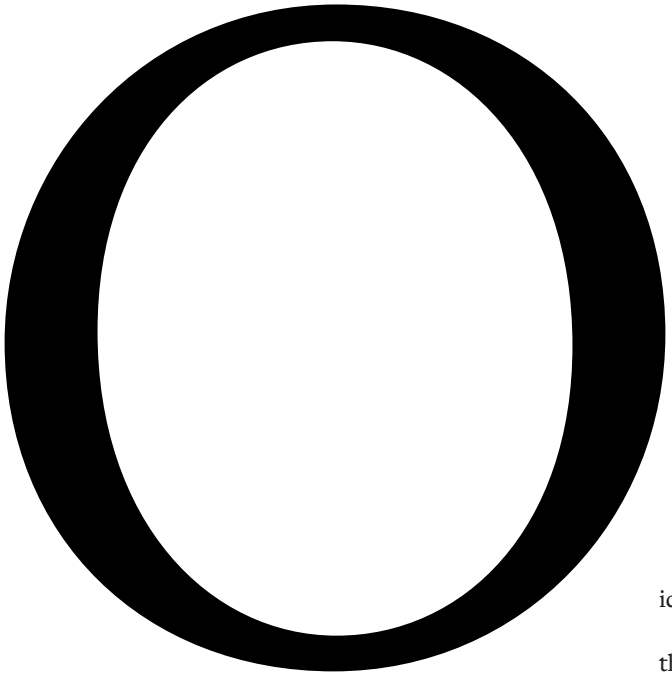
by DAN HUGGER





**The publication of a "Statement of Principles" has clarified many of National Conservatism's aims and premises. Yet the false dichotomy at the heart of this explanatory text only reinforces many of the original objections to the movement itself.**

Reimagining *The Birth of Old Glory* by Percy Moran, circa 1917, depicting Betsy Ross presenting the flag to George Washington



**ON THE AFTERNOON** of November 3, 2021, I sat alone at a table in the Orlando Airport TGI Fridays, exhausted. Equally travel-weary families (or at least parents), whose children still bustled with energy, surrounded me. I was grateful for getting through TSA security with plenty of time for a meal before my flight, and grateful to be—for the first time in three days—alone with my thoughts. When my salad arrived, I pushed aside my notes from NatCon 2, the National Conservative movement's flagship conference—a whirlwind of keynotes, panels, and breakout sessions—and my thoughts turned to *The Count of Monte Cristo*: "How did I escape? With difficulty. How did I plan this moment? With pleasure."

> "THE STATEMENT'S MULTIPLE AUTHORS SUGGEST THAT NATIONAL CONSERVATISM IS A GENUINE MOVEMENT, NOT MERELY THE EXPRESSION OF ANY ONE INDIVIDUAL'S IDIOSYNCRASIES."

I later crafted those notes, additional research, conversations, and a dash of humor into an article for the Winter-Spring 2022 issue of *Religion & Liberty*. In that piece, "What I Saw at the National Conservatism Conference," I tried to come to terms with what "National Conservatism" meant. A neat and tidy definition eluded me. Such definitions are always difficult for political, and especially ideological, movements.

National Conservatism was by turns various things: a brand, an emerging political coalition, and an attitude. The brand I judged amorphous and thus harmless and uninteresting. The political coalition: undertheorized and untested. The attitude: an invitation to stop being polite and start being real, and positively dangerous in its conflation of acrimony with authenticity. In the past year, much has changed, making the "National Conservative movement" worth revisiting. The "National Conservatism" on offer at NatCon 2 was amorphous but anti-establishment, billing itself as "against the dead consensus." As outsiders, the NatCons sought political alliances with "anti-Marxist liberals" to realize their political ambitions, and their often strident tone could be seen as a rhetorical strategy to raise the movement's profile.

The "National Conservatism" at NatCon 3 in 2022, however, was different. Kevin Roberts, president

of the Heritage Foundation, long the institutional center of what has been called "Conservatism Inc.," referred to the NatCon movement as "ours." The conference's most celebrated speaker, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, is perhaps—with the popularity of former President Trump waning as I write this—the nation's most popular conservative politician. National Conservatism has been rediscovering itself *as* conservatism itself. Yoram Hazony, president of the Edmund Burke Foundation, explicitly made the case for this in his popular revisionist history, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*.

Only the attitude appears unchanged, leading Stephanie Slade, senior editor at *Reason* and fellow in liberal studies at the Acton Institute, to refer to the movement as "will-to-power conservatism." As it turns out, this is not the story of one man's escape from a conference, but a movement's attempted escape from idiosyncrasy into something ostensibly mainstream, or at least comprehensible. It was a classic mistake, however, one Michael Chabon forewarns all would-be escapists about in his novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*: "Forget about what you are escaping *from*. …Reserve your anxiety for what you are escaping to."

## A MOVEMENT WITH A HOME

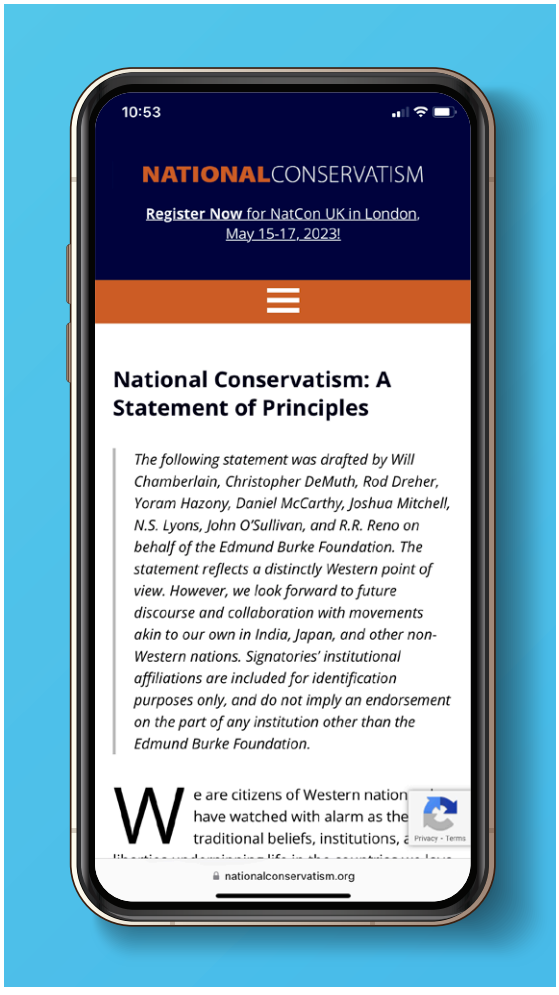
The National Conservative movement continues to evolve. Its rise in prominence is merely one example. Its substance has crystallized as well—a natural development in the course of all movements that pose both peril and promise. The great upheaval in the religious life of 16th-century western Europe, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation both, serve as instructive examples. In his magisterial work *The Reformation: A History*, Diarmaid MacCulloch observes that, as the Reformation progressed, it "witnessed a process to which historians have given the unlovely but perhaps necessary jargon label 'confessionalizaton': the creation of fixed identities and systems of beliefs for separate churches which had previously been more fluid in their self-understanding." Rival churches and traditions "buttressed their differing positions with an increasing array of confessional statements, saying exactly what they did and did not believe."

On June 15, 2022, the National Conservative movement entered into its own period of confessionalization with "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles," published in both *The American Conservative* and *The European Conservative*. (One of the most paradoxical features of National Conservatism is its international character.) An editor's note preceding the statement disclosed, "The following statement was drafted by Will Chamberlain, Christopher DeMuth, Rod Dreher, Yoram Hazony, Daniel McCarthy, Joshua Mitchell, N.S. Lyons, John O'Sullivan, and R.R. Reno on behalf of the Edmund Burke Foundation." The statement boasted a long list of signatories, including academics, a college president, journalists, a priest, a filmmaker, publishers, and think tankers the world over.


**Governor Ron DeSantis' keynote address at the National Conservatism Conference in Miami, September 2022**

The statement's multiple authors suggest that National Conservatism is a genuine movement, not merely the expression of any one individual's idiosyncrasies. Its drafting on behalf of the Edmund Burke Foundation identifies it as having an institutional home. Its wide and diverse array of signatories evidences its range of influence. And most important, the statement's collaborative and official nature, as well as its wide reception, affords it a greater weight than the op-eds, podcasts, conference talks, and books by individual authors that had defined the movement less perfectly in the past.

The substance of the statement itself, *sans* the editorial note and list of signatories, is bipartite. It begins with a concise three paragraphs that outline the identity of its confessors, their motivating concerns, the historical tradition to which they appeal to address those concerns, and the general political




National Conservatism's "Statement of Principles"

principle they see as best suited to address these concerns. The second part lists 10 discreet principles informed by the first. The principles are then each addressed in a single paragraph unpacking the NatCon understanding of them.

In the history of religious confessions, particularly those of the Reformation, there are two ways in which people viewed those confessions: valid "because" (*quia*) the confession is biblical or merely "insofar as" (*quatenus*) it is biblical. Does "A Statement of Principles" serve as an authoritative statement "because" or merely "insofar as" it faithfully captures the spirit of National Conservatism?

The editor's note seems to indicate the latter, drawing attention to its culturally situated and contextual nature: "The statement reflects a distinctly Western point of view. However, we look forward to future discourse and collaboration with movements akin to our own in India, Japan, and other non-Western nations." One can be an Indian or Japanese "NatCon," or at least akin to one, without holding to the letter of the statement or insofar as it captures a distinctly Western form of National Conservatism.

In his opening address to NatCon 3, entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel seemed to suggest that viewing the statement, of which he was a signatory, too strictly would be a mistake: "It's always a little bit hard to know exactly how to define our movement. I think it is strikingly heterogeneous…we're not even some 'happy clappy church.'" "A Statement of Principles" is a reliable guide to the movement not because it captures its essence but only insofar as it does so, even within its own Western context.

## THE BACKLASH

The "Statement" was well received by NatCons, whose enthusiasm might even be characterized as "happy clappy" upon its release. It resulted in no great schisms within the movement and only occasioned criticism from former fellow travelers who had already become estranged from the movement (more on this later).

Criticism from outside the movement, however, was more forthcoming. Libertarians, fusionist conservatives, and liberals both classical and contemporary offered critiques in line with those of the past, but many welcomed the statement's more staid and irenic presentation of National Conservative ideas, free from some of the rhetorical pyrotechnics the movement had become known for.

Two "post-liberal" constituencies presented their own forceful criticisms as well. The first such constituency is represented by the authors of "An Open Letter Responding to the NatCon 'Statement of Principles.'" This open letter includes an eclectic group of academics and thinkers among its signatories, including Phillip Blond, Jennifer Frey, John Milbank, James K.A. Smith, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. All style themselves as "critics of contemporary liberalism…from both the Left and Right." Their objections to "A Statement of Principles" are multifaceted, but all flow from what they believe to be the insufficient or mistaken theological grounding of the NatCon project.

The second post-liberal constituency was positively prescient in its criticisms of the main threads

of "The Statement of Principles." A month prior to their publication, Sohrab Ahmari, founder and editor of the online magazine *Compact*, delivered a stinging indictment of National Conservativism in his essay "The Return of Liberal Nationalism," published on May 12, 2022. Ahmari had spoken twice at NatCon 2 in 2021; he is one of the aforementioned fellow travelers who had become estranged from the movement.

James Patterson, associate professor of politics and chair of the politics department at Ave Maria University, has provided the helpful descriptor of "neo-integralists" to describe this constituency, which includes Ahmari, Fr. Edmund Waldstein, Gladden Pappin, Patrick Deneen, and Adrian Vermeule. As Patterson detailed in his essay published in *Religion & Liberty*, "An Awkward Alliance: Neo-Integralism and National Conservatism," this group had always been an uneasy fit within the emerging National Conservative movement.

Ahmari's critique, although a post-liberal one, is offered on terms different from those of the first constituency noted above: that nationalism is not a sufficient ground on which to oppose liberalism and that National Conservatism is a fundamentally liberal project and better seen as a species of Liberal Nationalism. Whether or not Ahmari had access to "A Statement of Principles" prior to its publication, his piece offers a trenchant critique of the principles in any event.

**Lord Acton (1834–1902)**

As Kant observed, getting to the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) is more difficult than it seems. The historical development of National Conservatism, the nature and limits of "A Statement of Principles," and its reception among National Conservatives and their critics, are each necessary to understand and appreciate National Conservatism as confessed in the "Statement of Principles," which opens by disclosing the identity of its confessors before the motivation for the movement itself: "We are citizens of Western nations."

The management guru Stephen Covey advised those seeking to be highly effective to "Begin with the end in mind," advice taken in the rhetoric of "A Statement of Principles." Those who confess to National Conservatism do so from their identity as citizens of nations. Here Ahmari senses the pungent odor of liberalism, which he sees as nationalism's natural bedfellow: "Liberalism and nationalism arose in tandem…Rights-based citizenship made it necessary to delineate who counts as a citizen, and who doesn't, and the answer more often than not came down to ethnic or linguistic groupings." Such ethic or linguistic groupings are commonly called "nations." Privileging this identity, particular and national, was also a cause of concern for the drafters of the "Open Letter," who asked, "What after all has underpinned the Western, European, and Christian civilisation that National Conservatism claims to defend and uphold if not a universalist ethical, spiritual and, yes, political vision?"

This is a very worthwhile question indeed, one Lord Acton explored extensively in his 1862 essay "Nationality":

> Christianity rejoices at the mixture of races, as paganism identifies itself with their differences, because truth is universal, and errors various and particular…in the ancient world idolatry and nationality went together, and the same term applied in Scripture to both. It was the mission of the Church to overcome national differences.

In the most startling manner here, we see the Christian liberal, post-liberal, and neo-integralist converge in their critique of the NatCons as privileging national identity over and above others, particularly a religious one.

It should be noted in fairness that here even the National Conservatives may sense a danger. While "A Statement of Principles" refers to national

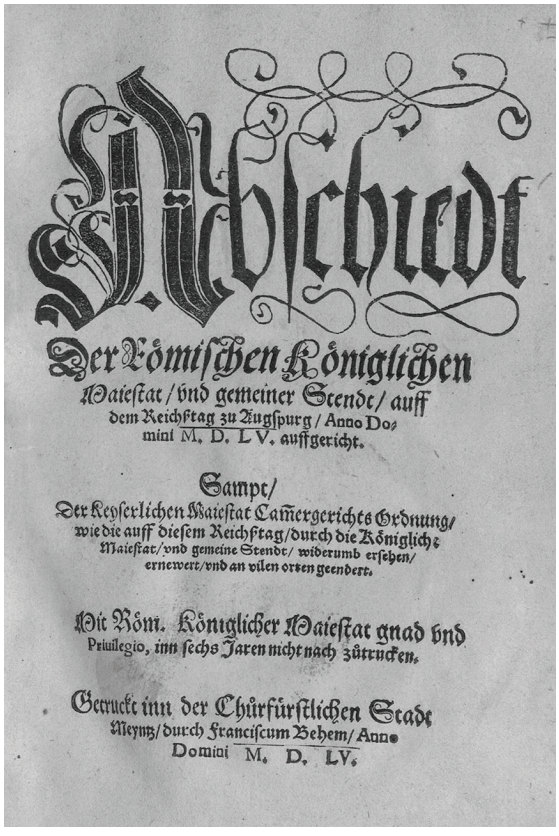

**U.S. border fence east of Nogales, Arizona**

institutions, interests, traditions, constitutions, languages, and religions, it passes over any mention of ethnicity and explicitly denounces any racialist understanding of nation (see "Principle 10—Race"). However, on the question of immigration ("Principle 9"), it states that while immigration has historically been a great asset to Western nations, "today's penchant for uncontrolled and unassimilated immigration has become a source of weakness and instability, not strength and dynamism, threatening internal dissension and ultimately dissolution of the political community." It suggests unspecified "assimilationist policies" to mitigate this threat. Presumably such policies would encourage assimilation into national institutions, interests, traditions, constitutions, and languages—but what of religion?

The status of religion is made ambiguous by "Principle 4—God and Public Religion." This principle privileges the Bible as "our surest guide, nourishing a fitting orientation toward God, to the political traditions of the nation, to public morals, to the defense of the weak, and to the recognition of things rightly regarded as sacred," and commends its reading as a source of "shared Western civilization," to be studied in schools and universities by believer and unbeliever alike. The Bible as national text is a strange category, somewhat more than literature to be appreciated but a great deal less than the Word of God.

"Principle 4" goes on to proclaim, "Where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private." While not specified, this principle would seem to hold for majority Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu nations. Allowances are made for religious minorities, who should be "protected in the observance of their own traditions, in the free governance of their communal institutions, and in all matters pertaining to the rearing and education of their children," as well as "adult individuals," who "should be protected from religious or ideological coercion in their private lives and in their homes."

The course charted here is analogous to the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his


Abschied
Der Römischen Königlichen
Maiestat / vnd gemeiner Stendt / auff
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mini M. D. LV. auffgericht.
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Der Keyserlichen Maiestat Cammergerichts Ordnung /
wie die auff diesem Reichstag / durch die Königliche
Maiestat / vnd gemeine Stendt / widerumb ersehen /
ernewert / vnd an vilen orten geendert.
Mit Röm. Königlicher Maiestat gnad vnd
Priuilegio, inn sechs Jaren nicht nach zütrucken.
Getruckt inn der Churfürstlichen Stadt
Meyntz / durch Franciscum Behem / Anno
Domini M. D. LV.

Title page of the Augsburg Settlement, 1555

religion"), which underlay the 16th-century Augsburg Settlement, except here with the sovereignty of princes displaced by that of the people and the addition of some protection for religious minorities and persons within their private lives. Deep sectarian divisions among Christians in America complicate matters, making "Christianity and its moral vision" difficult to describe outside the level of abstraction. This Gordian knot becomes more impossible when one considers that sectarian boundaries among American Christians overlap largely with the racial and ethnic boundaries National Conservatives would rather avoid.

Perhaps the best that could be hoped for is the American civic religion of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which failed to satisfy not only non-Christians but Catholics and the then-emerging fundamentalist movement as well. Neo-integralists would simply, like Alexander, slice through this knot with the blade of political Catholicism, but there seems no reason to abandon our current liberal settlement, imperfect though it may be. For as Lord

"PERHAPS THE BEST THAT COULD BE HOPED FOR IS THE AMERICAN CIVIC RELIGION OF THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES."

Acton observed, it is rooted in the New Testament itself: "But when Christ said: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's,' those words, spoken on His last visit to the Temple, three days before His death, gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom." It was not left to the nation but to the Church to secure its own rights in constant struggle with states that habitually fail to acknowledge their bounds:

> For our Lord not only delivered the precept, but created the force to execute it. To maintain the necessary immunity in one supreme sphere, to reduce all political authority within defined limits, ceased to be an aspiration of patient reasoners, and was made the perpetual charge and care of the most energetic institution and the most universal association in the world.

## CAPITALISMS GOOD AND BAD

Such difficulties concerning how we define nations, and what it means to be a citizen as viewed through the prism of nationality, remain underdeveloped in "A Statement of Principles." The reason for this underdevelopment may be the perceived urgency of the unfolding tragedy that animates the movement: "We have watched with alarm as the traditional beliefs, institutions, and liberties underpinning life

in the countries we love have been progressively undermined and overthrown."

The crisis of traditional belief, institutions, and liberties is one universally acknowledged by the National Conservatives as well as their critics. Ahmari, as befitting the founder and editor of a magazine dedicated to challenging "the overclass that controls government, culture, and capital," locates this crisis in the "material motives" of the bourgeoisie, who aimed and succeeded in toppling "an older order dominated by multinational empires and underpinned by the moral authority of a universal church." The crises National Conservatives see unfolding within their nations is, in Ahmari's estimation, the result of an unfolding historical dialectic in which those very nations played a leading role.

The critics who signed the "Open Letter" similarly posit that nations themselves had a leading part in the current crises, although they are careful to avoid the materialist reductionism of Ahmari:

> The dissolution of national cultures was anticipated by the wiping out of local cultures, and the centralisation of power away from both local governments and civil society—notably churches, guilds, and other associations. It is nation-states as they are presently understood that have facilitated the ever-greater expansion of global capitalism and the unmediated technology that now threatens our social, civic, and spiritual lives.

The post-liberal answer to the Psalmist's perennial question, "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples meditate on a vain thing?" (Psalm 2:1) seems to be in large part "global capitalism." Pope St. John Paul II shared this concern: "If by 'capitalism' is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality," then this is indeed a contributing factor to our present crisis. But this is not the only sense of "capitalism"; the pontiff observed a positive and constructive sense as well: "If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility

**President Ronald Reagan signing the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 at his California ranch**

for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector," then it is in this sense that we can justly state that "capitalism," or better constructed simply the "free economy," continues to lift millions out of poverty the world over. The NatCons recognize this sense when it is affirmed in "Principle 6—Free Enterprise" that: "We believe that an economy based on private property and free enterprise is best suited to promoting the prosperity of the nation and accords with traditions of individual liberty that are central to the Anglo-American political tradition."

"A Statement of Principles" offers many caveats to this, emphasizing the need for a strong juridical framework and a "free enterprise" oriented to the national interest. Both of these caveats classical economists, such as Adam Smith, would have taken as a given. "Principle 7—Public Research," which recommends the deployment of "large-scale public resources on scientific and technological research," might clash with Smith's "system of natural liberty," but the statement does not divulge the actual details and mechanics of such policies.

Efforts such as this have been most generously mixed and least generously disastrous in the past. "Think Big" efforts of the Third National Government of New Zealand contributed to inflation and industrial troubles. Their failure indirectly set the stage for the economic liberalization undertaken by the Fourth Labour Government (dubbed Rogernomics after Finance Minister Roger Douglas) in the late 1980s and '90s. These were similar to liberalization efforts under Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom during the same period that saw a worldwide breakdown of the postwar Keynesian consensus.

## THE MYTH OF ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY

This notion that national policy should serve as a catalyst to economic development can be attributed to the centrality that "A Statement of Principles" gives the nation as locus of the historical development that has guaranteed the fruits of mature civilizations, including "patriotism and courage, honor and loyalty, religion and wisdom, congregation and family, man and woman, the sabbath and the sacred, and reason and justice." This historical account is one Yoram Hazony has developed in his book *The Virtue of Nationalism* and extended in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. This just-so story has been criticized by many, including the short and incisive review of *The Virtue of Nationalism* featured in vol. 22, no. 2 of the *Journal of Markets and Morality*: "While the author claims to add clarity to political theory, the opposite is unfortunately the case. All political philosophies are made to fit a false dichotomy between nationalism, which affirms national sovereignty, and imperialism, which seeks to dismantle it."

Both Ahmari and the drafters of the "Open Letter" take exception to this false dichotomy in their own ways. The "Open letter" states, "We agree with the signatories of the National Conservatism statement regarding the importance of the substantive goods that are today commonly threatened by globalisation. But these goods must be pursued at every level. There is no safeguard within nationalism that necessarily promotes them, no principle within internationalism that inherently opposes them." The post-liberals rightly argue for the principle of subsidiarity in addressing the current crisis, and deftly observe:

> The absolute sovereignty of the nation-state presented in the Statement of Principles is a modern myth, which traditional conservatives such as Edmund Burke questioned because, as with the French Revolution, it can lead to terror and tyranny. Burke's alternative was a "cultural commonwealth" of peoples and nations covenanting with each other in the interests of mutual benefit and flourishing.

The principles of national independence and the rejection of imperialism and globalism, Principles 1 and 2 of "A Statement of Principles," respectively, are not in themselves objectionable but can be a positive danger if removed and abstracted from the human person, society, and the common good. Lord Acton warned of precisely this in his essay "Nationality": "Whenever a single definite object is made the supreme end of the State, be it the advantage of a class, the safety or the power of the country, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or the support of any speculative idea, the State becomes for the time inevitably absolute." Nevertheless, the sincere, if unartfully grounded, rejection of imperialism in its historic as well as contemporary forms recommends these principles: "We reject imperialism in its various contemporary forms: We condemn the imperialism of China, Russia, and other authoritarian powers."

Yet it is precisely this affirmation that Ahmari takes exception to in "The Return of Liberal Nationalism," where he notes, "As non-liberal states such as Russia and China prosecute geographic claims along their peripheries, a supposed post-national liberal empire increasingly rallies to national flags." The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the facilitator, in Ahmari's reading, for a renewed convergence of interests between liberalism and nationalism: "Liberalism and nationalism embraced for the first time since their estrangement in 1945." This applies, according to Ahmari, to his estranged former allies the NatCons as well.

While Ahmari carefully notes that the Russian invasion constitutes a "calamity for the Ukrainian people," he seems more alarmed by the coalition of liberals and nationalists that have come to their defense. His hostility to liberalism is so great that, in a since-deleted tweet, he claimed to be "at peace with a Chinese-led 21st century" because "late-liberal America is too dumb and decadent to last as a superpower."

It is in opposition to such myopia that the "A Statement of Principles" has exercised its most salutary and responsible leadership. This commitment to genuine and legitimate national sovereignty, "a world of independent nations—each pursuing its own national interests and upholding national traditions that are its own," may not be, as claimed, "the only alternative to universalist ideologies," but it does provide concrete limits to the fetishization of arbitrary power.

**Edmund Burke (1729–1797)**

If the confessionalization achieved in "A Statement of Principles" archives only the marginalization of those who would grandstand for the enemies of the liberal democratic West and humanity itself, it will have achieved much. The statement also addresses issues in a clearer and more coherent way than done previously, which also recommends it, even when mistaken on those issues.

> "THESE INTRA-CONSERVATIVE DEBATES HAVE ONLY INTENSIFIED, AS EXHIBITED BY THE 15 ROUNDS OF VOTING NECESSARY FOR REPUBLICANS TO ELECT A SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE."

## FEAR AND ITS USES

These intra-conservative debates have only intensified, as exhibited by the 15 rounds of voting necessary for Republicans, the political home of much of the American conservative movement, to elect a Speaker of the House. The divisions in the caucus do not neatly correspond to the divisions between NatCons and their critics, however. They represent the anxieties concerning the future of the nation that motivate the movement. Edmund Burke, namesake of the institutional home of the NatCon movement, saw that "early and provident fear is the mother of


**16th century Bremen (c. 1580) by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg**

safety," but he also warned of its dangers: "No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."

The post-liberal critics responsible for the "Open Letter" provide great insight in writing, "Political movements must be based on charity and friendship if they are to be in any way aligned with the Christian political tradition." Here they echo the words of the beloved disciple: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

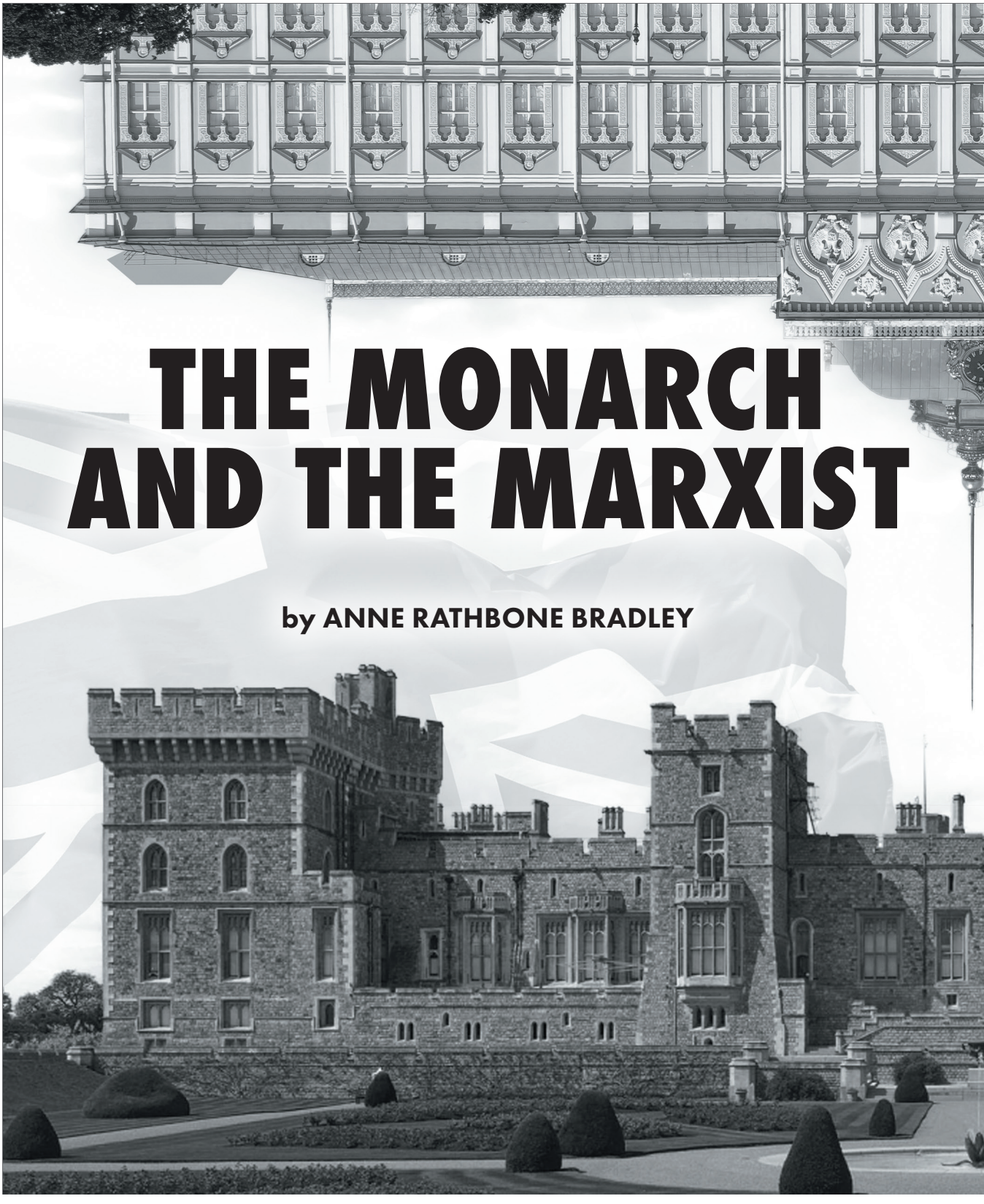
While confessions can helpfully clarify, they also serve to calcify divisions. MacCulloch provides a moving illustration of this peril, recounting part of the history of the German city Bremen:

> Bremen went over in the 1530s to the Lutheran cause against the opposition of its Catholic archbishop, but by 1561 the growth of Reformed belief among the merchant elite delivered control of the city into Reformed hands.…The aristocratic canons of the Cathedral, however, remained staunch Lutherans: the resulting clash between city and Cathedral authorities closed the doors of the building to worshippers. For an astonishing seventy-seven years after 1561, the vast church, locked and silent, cast its shadow over the busy life of the two principal city markets, the medieval treasures of its interior preserved unused though undefaced.

A divided conservative movement is a movement unable to rise to the challenges of the crises of our time. Without responsible leadership we will witness further disintegration into vacuous and ineffectual right-wing populism fueled only by the basest resentments.

The confessionalization of National Conservatism has served to clarify, and one hopes those clarifications will be the basis for further dialog and not the pretext for the ossification of division. While the concerns animating National Conservatism are real, its reduction of today's problems and tomorrow's solutions to issues of nationality, if stubbornly held, will lead to stalemate and irrelevance. A constructive political vision must, as Lord Acton concluded, be based on the human person and dedicated to human freedom, for "liberty alone demands for its realisation the limitation of the public authority, for liberty is the only object which benefits all alike, and provokes no sincere opposition." The Psalmist tells us that often "the kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord" (Psalm 2:2). It is not by the nation alone but only through the organic development of all spheres of life—according to their own principles—that God's order can be restored in these troubled times. RL

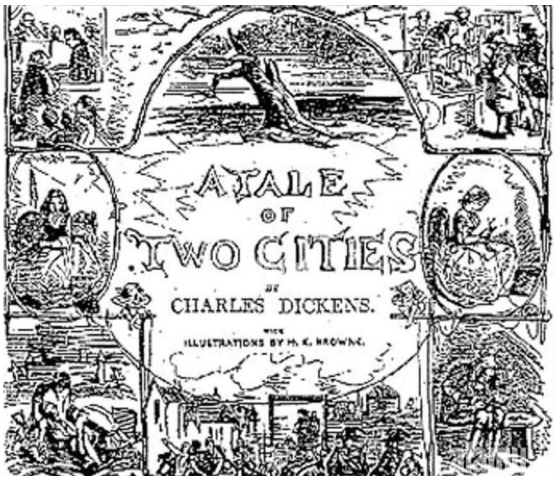
***Dan Hugger** is librarian and research associate at the Acton Institute.*



# THE MONARCH AND THE MARXIST

by ANNE RATHBONE BRADLEY

**They lived through roughly the same period of history and died within days of each other, but Queen Elizabeth II and Mikhail Gorbachev left very different legacies. It serves us well to consider why.**




**A portion of Hablot K. Browne's cover for *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, published in *All the Year Round*, 1859**

**QUEEN ELIZABETH II** and Mikhail Gorbachev were born five years apart. They lived through a century of enormous change. Seven decades before either was born, Charles Dickens (1859) penned *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel reflecting on the turbulence of the French Revolution. It opens with this famous paragraph:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of despair, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

That was certainly true in 1859, when England was in the early throes of the Industrial Revolution. At this time, life expectancy in England and Wales was 42 years, and 25% of children born alive died before their fifth birthday. In Russia, life expectancy was 29 years. England was on the cusp of unprecedented economic growth, which brought people into cities, bred innovation, and generated monumental gains in living standards for ordinary people. Russia, which became the Soviet Union in 1917 after the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of a socialist state, would embark on almost a century of death and destruction.

It seems that the Dickens paradox is true so long as you are living within the context of economic progress. In 1859, life was unbearably harsh compared to today's standards: no microwaves, antibiotics, or GPS. When living conditions are improving, the best of times always may still lie ahead but still seem within reach. Queen Elizabeth II and Mikhail Gorbachev were born in 1926 and 1931, respectively. They died just nine days apart and lived through almost a century of economic, political, and social change—yet their experiences were diametrically opposed.

## A LIFE OF DUTY AND FAITH

Queen Elizabeth II, born Princess Elizabeth of York, lived cradle-to-grave in royal luxury. She became heir presumptive at the age of 10 and queen at 25. Her reign was almost 71 years, the longest of any British monarch and the longest female reign in history, surpassing even her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria. She died in her beloved Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. She lived a remarkable life with all the creature comforts that could be afforded anyone—and those creature comforts certainly changed over her long life. What's remarkable is that over her lifetime the gap between the conveniences available to royalty versus those available to ordinary British citizens would narrow considerably. Queen Elizabeth likely carried the same cellphone upon her death as you do. When she was born, the cellphone was inaccessible even to queens and kings, because it did not yet exist.

Queen Elizabeth II's coronation ceremony was held on June 2, 1953, and was the first to be broadcast on live television. Three-fourths of the population of the United Kingdom watched and one-third tuned in by radio. Three million people lined the streets as the queen and her entourage processed back to Buckingham Palace. Her reign saw many changes and disruptions—political, economic, and social. She witnessed World War II as a child and reigned during the Suez Crisis, in which Great Britain invaded Egypt. She presided over the decolonization of Africa and the Caribbean in the 1960s and '70s, during which time more than 20 nations declared independence from Britain. This period was marked by great social and political changes in Britain, Europe, and beyond. Queen Elizabeth II, unlike Mikhail Gorbachev, largely played a diplomatic rather than a political role. In 1965, she traveled to West Germany, the first official visit by a British royal since 1913. Her trip commemorated the 20th anniversary of the end of World War II and helped facilitate friendship and reconciliation between Britain and Germany. She would go on to witness the entry of Great Britain into the European Economic Community in 1973, which would later become the European Union.

The 20th century would see Britain transform from a mighty global empire into a smaller commonwealth of nations seeking greater economic and political freedom. We certainly cannot and should not attribute such a transformation directly to


**Top:** Queen Elizabeth II's official coronation portrait by Cecil Beaton, 1953. **Bottom:** The queen's visit to China, 1986.

Queen Elizabeth, as constitutional limits meant she kept mostly quiet about political affairs and viewed her role as head of the royal family and "Defender of the Faith," i.e., the Church of England. She served as the nation's top "diplomat" and wielded soft rather than hard power, another significant difference from Gorbachev. In that role she received Pope John Paul II on his visit to England, which was the first time a reigning pope had ever set foot on British soil. In 1986, upon Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's agreement to return sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997, Queen Elizabeth became the first British monarch to visit the Chinese mainland. She celebrated her Golden Jubilee, her 50th year on the throne, in 2002, traveling more than 40,000 miles that year, including visits to the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. She also visited 70 cities and towns in 50 counties in the United Kingdom. In 2011 she and her husband, Prince Philip, visited the Republic of Ireland—the first visit of a British monarch in 100 years—as she worked to repair the troubled Anglo-Irish relationship.

Prince Philip died on April 9, 2021, ending a 73-year-long marriage and partnership. Nevertheless, Queen Elizabeth carried on managing "The Firm," as the royal family is known, and meeting her responsibilities, including officially appointing Boris Johnson's successor, Liz Truss, as prime minister just two days before she died, age 96. Even her detractors had to admit that her life was one of duty, faith, and diplomatic tact, and punctuated by many "firsts." She was a new and different leader.

Her Christian faith was central to her life and helped her weather many personal storms, including the death of her father when she was just 25. Around the same time, her sister, Princess Margaret, had an affair with a married, much older man. Her four children were also no strangers to scandal. Prince Charles, her eldest, had several romances before he married the much younger Diana Spencer in 1981. Queen Elizabeth II described 1992 as her "annus horribilis": Three of her children's marriages dissolved, a fire erupted in Windsor palace, and Charles' affair with Camilla Bowles continued, leading to his separation from Diana. Additionally, the monarchy grew increasingly unpopular and was viewed as a drain on public finances during a time of recession. As a public gesture, the queen agreed to pay income and capital gain taxes that year, a custom that has continued ever since. More scandal followed, however, with the divorce of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1996. The death of Princess Diana the next year rocked the royal family.

Through it all, her faith was the foundation of her principles and buoyed her through personal trials, and also shaped her view of how we should treat each other and how we should live.

She offered a Christmas message every year in which she spoke candidly about the importance of that faith. In 2000 she spoke boldly of the practicality of her faith:

> But the true measure of Christ's influence is not only in the lives of the saints but also in the good works quietly done by millions of men and women day in and day out throughout the centuries. Many will have been inspired by Jesus' simple but powerful teaching: love God and love thy neighbor as thyself—in other words, treat others as you would like them to treat you. His great emphasis was to give spirituality a practical purpose.

## A FAILED REFORMER

Mikhail Gorbachev was born just five years after Queen Elizabeth, under the reign of Joseph Stalin, one of history's most ruthless dictators. His parents were poor peasants of Ukrainian and Russian descent. His mother was a devout Orthodox Christian and had him secretly baptized as a child, but later his parents would publicly support Soviet atheism. His maternal grandfather joined the Communist Party and worked to collectivize the local farms and later became chair of the party. Yet both of his grandfathers served time in Stalin's gulags during the Great Purge, and several of his family members died during the Soviet famine of 1930–33.

At a young age, Gorbachev witnessed the machinations of dictatorial central planning. His father, Sergey, was a member of the Red Army and in 1948 was awarded the Order of Lenin for his large grain harvest; Mikhail would become the youngest winner of the Order of the Red Banner of Labor the very next year, which would help his political career and allow him to enter school without an entrance exam or interview. In 1959 he was admitted to Moscow State University, the Soviet Union's top university. He joined the Communist Party in 1952 and publicly defended a Jewish student who was accused of disloyalty. This anti-Semitic campaign would ultimately morph into Stalin's conspiratorial Doctor's Plot, an


**Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev at a summit in Geneva, 1985**

alleged conspiracy among Soviet medical specialists, mostly Jews, to murder high-ranking Soviet government leaders.

Gorbachev's experiences and friendships during this time likely were important in his later role as a reformer. He befriended a Czech student named Zdeněk Mlynář who later became the prominent leader of the 1968 Prague Spring, an important movement for liberalization and freedom. Although Gorbachev remained committed to Marxist-Leninist ideals, he worried about the sustainability and legacy of the Stalinist system. Throughout his life, unlike Queen Elizabeth II, he operated within and eventually ran the political machinery of his country. He supported Marxist socialism but also saw its defects and would attempt to reform it—unsuccessfully. (His final paper before graduation from Moscow State was on the advantages of socialist democracy over bourgeois democracy.)

After the death of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev called for reforms that Gorbachev supported while maintaining that he remained a true Marxist who merely rejected Stalinism. In 1971 he was elected to the Communist Party's Central Committee after two decades of post-graduate party work. In 1980 he became a full member of the Politburo and in 1985 was appointed general secretary of the Communist Party and the nation's new leader.

That same year he initiated a campaign of *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("reconstruction") to reform the Soviet Union's economic and political system within a broader communist structure. He also met President Ronald Reagan in Geneva for a series of meetings at the apex of the Cold War. In 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. More reforms came in 1989, when the last Soviet forces left Afghanistan. Monumentally, 1989 also saw the Berlin Wall fall as reform cemented in East Germany and the doors to the West finally reopened. This came just two years after Reagan implored Mr. Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall."

More than 70 years of Soviet central planning was coming to an end, but not without every internal effort to save it. Gorbachev was pragmatically, not principally, forced into reform. For example, when

Economist Thomas Sowell

he took office, he initiated another five-year plan to increase the building of machines by 50%. What he didn't realize is that true innovation cannot come from technocratic planning. Yet he knew the Soviet Union would continue to fall behind the rest of the world without reform. His free-market rhetoric was abandoned in practice and, as economist and Soviet scholar Peter Boettke claims, *perestroika* failed because it wasn't ever tried. For his efforts, however, Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, then resigned as Soviet leader in 1991, dissolving the Soviet Union. The Soviet flag over the Kremlin was replaced with the Russian flag. He ran in Russia's presidential election in 1996, winning less than 1% of the vote. He died on August 30, 2022, age 91, less than two weeks before Queen Elizabeth II. Unlike the unwavering and public Christian faith of Queen Elizabeth II, the faith of Gorbachev was the subject of much speculation, but most likely he died an atheist.

## A CONFLICT OF VISIONS

Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the global feeling of loss was palpable. Gorbachev, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, left a different and more complex legacy. It was not their birth status as much as their conflicting visions that determined their paradoxical lives and contrasting legacies. Queen Elizabeth II's reign saw vast economic progress not only in Britain but in nations around the globe. Over her long life, she witnessed the egalitarian nature of economic growth within a capitalist system that understood human nature as more or less fixed yet susceptible to the right kinds of motivation for real moral and quality-of-life progress. Gorbachev, however, was the product of a system dominated by monopolistic state oppression, violence, and human immiseration. The Soviet system protected the political elites and lived off the backbreaking work of those who managed not to be utterly crushed by Marxist ideology. It was a system predicated on an unconstrained vision of human nature—man as something pliable and to be reinvented—and as such was doomed to fail.

Thomas Sowell in his superb book *A Conflict of Visions* demonstrates how our vision of the world informs the ideologies we embrace. Our vision is our sense of how the world works; it's what we feel or intuit before we apply systematic reasoning. From this we develop theories about how to solve problems. Our beliefs about divergent economic, political, and legal systems are grounded in social visions and our perceptions of human nature.

Sowell contrasts the constrained and unconstrained visions of man. The constrained vision of human nature can be seen in Adam Smith's description of the moral limitations of human beings. We are not nor can we be transformed into purely altruistic beings who always act selflessly. Our moral sympathies are limited. We are self-interested, and as such we pursue our happiness first and foremost in our daily activities—yet we are still capable of love and sacrifice.

In short, we are fallen and finite, sinful and self-interested, yet with a deep need to cooperate in community. Smith acknowledges this but doesn't throw up his hands in despair; rather, he alters his view of what is possible. Both Smith and Sowell see mankind from the constrained vision, and this informs their beliefs about what policies, models of government, and economic systems are feasible given what human beings essentially are. If our starting point is that man has incomplete knowledge and is self-interested, then any system predicated upon sheer altruism will fail. If man's nature is immutable, then the institutions of government and economics must be grounded in that reality; if they are not, they cannot possibly achieve their stated goals, because they will constantly be kicking against the goads of both human nature and natural law. Moreover, they may create an avalanche of misery and unintended consequences.

Sowell demonstrates that the unconstrained vision of man can best be understood through the work of William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in England in 1793. Godwin paints man as an engineer—one who can create social benefits by intention alone. This unconstrained vision of essential human nature requires that we put others' needs before our own and that certain types of social arrangements be established to encourage and reward this ideal. Some of the language used to describe the unconstrained vision of man might nevertheless ring true to Christians and help explain modern efforts at "Christian socialism."

For example, Christians are asked to love the exile, the stranger, and the enemy. We are asked to sacrifice for Christ and the Kingdom. Philippians 2:4 admonishes us not only to look out for our interests but to also look out for the interest of others. We are inherently social beings gifted with reason and created for relationship and cooperation. All this is true and binding on *believers*. But civil society is made up of more than just believers, who themselves are fallen and broken, so living as Christ commands is infinitely challenging even on a personal level, which is why we are also required to repent of our sins daily. To attempt to craft an economic and political system run on such ideals may sound pious on paper but will prove to be more than just challenging in lived experience—it will prove *impossible*, as every such attempt in history has demonstrated.

What *is* possible is an emphasis on vocation, which is an important vehicle for us to both serve others and bring glory to God. When this works in concert with His purposes, we help restore shalom. As Martin Luther is reported to have said, the Christian shoemaker serves God by making a good shoe and selling it at a fair price, not by stamping crosses on the shoes. The cobbler is part of the *catallaxy*, the process of bringing people into the community, which generates peaceful cooperation and interdependence.

**William Godwin (1756–1836)**

> **"IF OUR STARTING POINT IS THAT MAN HAS INCOMPLETE KNOWLEDGE AND IS SELF-INTERESTED, THEN ANY SYSTEM PREDICATED UPON SHEER ALTRUISM WILL FAIL."**

Recognizing our sinful inclinations and human limitations must be the starting point of our analysis of which type of economic or political system will be able to achieve its proposed goals. The unconstrained vision presumes we can overcome who we are to create a better world, whether the world likes it or not. In short, human nature cannot be transformed as if it were merely a defective machine, nor through constitutional design or brute force.

Sowell's famous conclusion from all this is to acknowledge that there are no solutions, only tradeoffs. We cannot contrive a government system that eradicates sin, greed, and error. But we can take human nature as it is, rather than as we hope it could be, and still achieve extraordinary things. Just look around you (assuming you are living in a society that has benefited from a market economy that understands human behavior). Sowell, himself an atheist, would reject God as the source of human dignity but gets so much right about economics *because* he taps

into essential truths of human nature, even though he would disagree with their source.

The legacies of Queen Elizabeth II and Mikhail Gorbachev are profoundly divergent because they were informed by wholly disparate institutional environments that shaped their beliefs and actions. While neither was a political philosopher, Queen Elizabeth II lived in a country that governed according to a constrained vision of human nature and had personal convictions guided by her Christian faith in the fallen but redeemable nature of man.

Gorbachev's life and experiences were shaped by the quest for raw power—even his efforts at reform were plagued by the fallacy of the unconstrained vision of man. The Soviet economy was for decades characterized by state control of investments, shortages of consumer goods, little foreign trade, and public ownership of industrial assets. To manage resources and people in a collectivized economy requires force and obedience. Thus, the only acceptable faith was Soviet atheism, which demands that all hearts and minds serve the state. Marxism cannot be reconciled with a Christian understanding of the human person because it rejects individual human dignity, which is rooted in the *imago Dei*. Soviet-imposed atheism is not only anti-God but anti-human; it not only failed to deliver the goods but generated widespread personal and cultural decay. One of Gorbachev's biggest problems was rampant alcoholism: Drink was perhaps the only escape ordinary Russians had from their godless dystopian reality.

**Joseph Stalin's demolition of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, 1931**

## A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

While Great Britain enjoyed greater economic and political freedoms over the course of the 20th century, despite the depredations of two world wars, the Soviet economy, which had experienced modest industrialization in the 19th century, saw such freedoms evaporate. Moreover, with central economic planning and the stunted view of man that was part and parcel of Soviet ideology came a gruesome dictatorial regime that would stop at virtually nothing to crush its capitalist enemies and prove itself superior in every avenue of human endeavor. Even if the denizens of the Kremlin ever privately came to doubt the efficacy of Soviet socialism, empires don't retreat easily (those who have power always strive to keep it), and Western-style economic freedom, which spurs development and wealth creation and rewards individual initiative, can delegitimize regimes propped up by terror quickly. Violence is a feature of central economic planning, not a bug. Perhaps Gorbachev never realized this, or perhaps he could not bring himself to admit it. In his 2000 autobiography, for example, he wrote:

> To summarize briefly, I believe that the October revolution undoubtedly left an ineradicable mark on the entire history of the twentieth century. This is simply a fact. In essence, the entire course of events since has absorbed all aspects—both positive and negative—of our great revolution and the decades that followed. The revolution—despite the price that was paid—brought historical renewal to Russia, freed it from the heritage of the feudal and absolutist past, and allowed the modernization of our country to begin. And that was accomplished through the mental and physical labor of our people—a truly heroic achievement. To forget this, to portray the decades of Soviet rule simply as a lost era, would be dishonest. It would be especially dishonest to the people, the individuals, the entire populations that lived and labored during those times. True, an excessively high price was paid—above all, because of the totalitarian system, the product, and consequence of Stalinism. One of the most important lessons of those years is the need to reject and condemn unconditionally the totalitarian system, a system that tramples on all that is human in human beings, that turns people into slaves.

Gorbachev rejected Stalinism but embraced socialism to the end. Queen Elizabeth, although

born into the lap of preordained luxury, saw her country change in every imaginable way, including a post–World War II dalliance with a kind of socialism that earned it the "sick man of Europe" moniker. It became an emaciated economy dominated by powerful trade unions, and Britain today is still hardly a bastion of free-market capitalism. It's a mixed economy with "free healthcare," a social-welfare regime. Free-market reforms aren't always popular, as "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher (a title ironically given to her by a Soviet journalist) learned. Bad policies linger even under a Tory government, but voices for economic freedom are still fighting the good fight and can pave the way for future reforms.

Neither empires nor central planners, to borrow a phrase from Dylan Thomas, "go gentle into that good night." Despite its "mixed nature," the British economy nevertheless grew over the course of the 20th century through ingenuity and innovation, and human freedoms that had been elusive in an overly rigid hierarchical system were slowly secured through a form of government that was grounded in the nonnegotiable recognition of individual human dignity. For example, 200 years ago, the lives ordinary Russians and Brits lived were almost identical. Today these two countries are drastically different. The Economic Freedom Index ranks the United Kingdom the 22nd most free country in the world, whereas Russia scores in the "Mostly Unfree" category, ranking 94th out of 165 countries surveyed. The U.K. has more civil and political freedoms as well, ranking 20th in overall Human Freedom, while Russia lags far behind, with a rank of 119. The bad news continues for Russia when measuring political freedom. Russia earns the "Not Free" status in the Freedom House Index and scores a miserable 19/100 for political and civil liberties. The United Kingdom scores a 93/100, one of the most robust scores for political and civil liberties in the world, outperforming even the United States.

The Russian economy over the course of the 20th century stagnated, and people lived in unspeakable misery. Human-engineered famines and suffering at the hands of the state in the form of conspiratorial executions, labor camps, and mass annihilation were the status quo. One five-year plan led to another five-year plan, and they never ignited real economic growth of any kind because they couldn't. Gorbachev understood the need for reforms, and his work to end the Cold War was heroic. But it proved a necessary but not sufficient condition for the paradigmatic shift the Russian economy still requires, one that remains plagued by the unconstrained vision of man, despite the official end of Soviet communism.

This is where the legacy and history of the Russian Orthodox Church will be important for the future of Russia. It has experienced long periods of official recognition (even garnering the charge of Caesaropapism, an unhealthy wedding of church and state) as well as oppression, and today has once again a privileged role in Russian society, a change in status initiated by Boris Yeltsin in 1997 and continued under Vladimir Putin. Whether this will prove a great gain, securing for the Russian masses a freedom from a centralized and often dehumanizing control, remains an open question, especially in light of its apparent "baptizing" of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Church of England, however, operates quite differently than its Russian Orthodox counterpart. The CofE no longer has the unique political privileges it held for centuries. Philosopher and former socialist advocate Michael Novak argues that flourishing societies require economic freedom, political freedom, and liberty of conscience, or cultural pluralism. We need freedom undergirded by virtues which must be adopted rather than imposed. The virtues of freedom develop through the open contestation of ideas in the personal pursuit of truth.

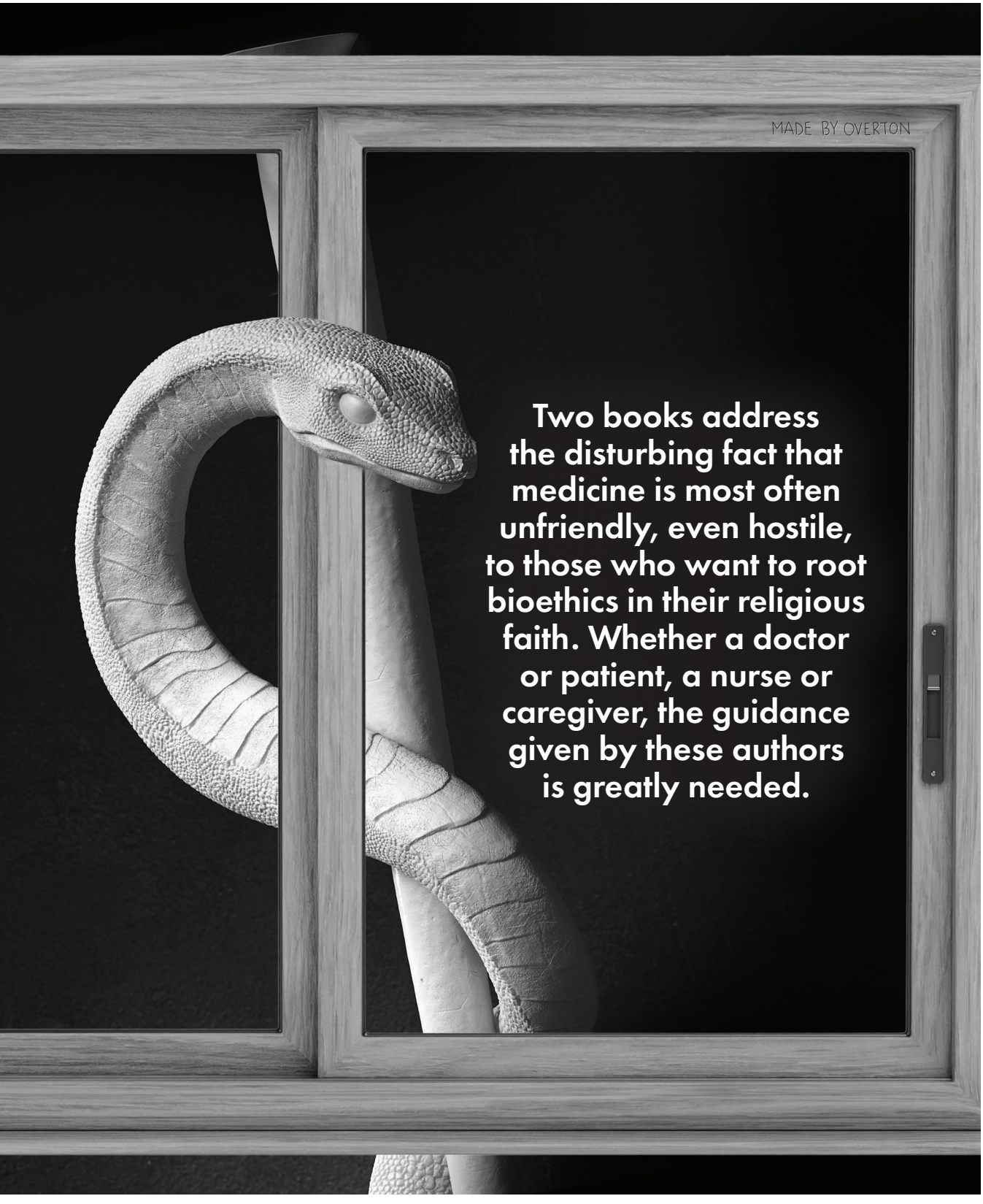
## THE FUTURE IS OPEN

Queen Elizabeth and Mikhail Gorbachev demonstrate two remarkable lives lived over one historic lifetime and offer us much to learn about why the 20th century was both the best of times and the worst of times. If we are open to it, this can provide an important lesson in political economy. There is no fixed economic or political destiny. All countries were once poor and illiberal; remarkable change is always possible even given the constraints of our nature. Human ingenuity, creativity, and productivity are waiting to be unleashed, and even the most corrupt and dysfunctional economies can rise from the wreckage of totalitarian hellscapes to experience human flourishing. But there is a path to get there that must be grounded in a proper vision of what it means to be human in the first place. RL

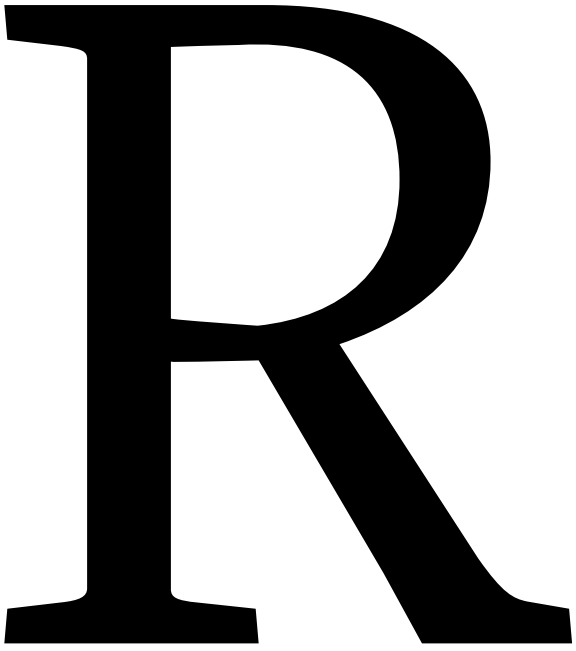
***Anne Rathbone Bradley**, Ph.D., is the George and Sally Mayer Fellow for Economic Education and the academic director at The Fund for American Studies. In addition, she is an Acton affiliate scholar and professor at the Institute of World Politics.*

# BIOETHICS AND THE HUMAN PERSON

by STEPHEN NAPIER




**Two books address the disturbing fact that medicine is most often unfriendly, even hostile, to those who want to root bioethics in their religious faith. Whether a doctor or patient, a nurse or caregiver, the guidance given by these authors is greatly needed.**



**REBECCA BROWN BEGINS** a 2019 essay "Philosophy Can Make the Previously Unthinkable Thinkable" by explaining the Overton window of political possibilities. Joseph Overton proposed the idea that think tanks should be designed to question the received opinion in both academia and the public regarding certain public policy issues. Think tanks could shift the window of possibilities, making the unthinkable thinkable. Brown's point is that philosophers should take a page out of Overton's strategy. Philosophers are particularly situated to diagnose "unjustified assertions" and point out "circularities."

That there are received opinions in contemporary bioethics on issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and human embryo destructive research is somewhat clear; arguments that include nonpermissive judgments on these issues are underrepresented. Brown observes correctly that unorthodox "positions on contentious [practical/ethical] topics attract far more scrutiny than abstract philosophical contributions to niche subjects. This means that, in effect, the former are required to be more rigorous than the latter, and to foresee and head off more potential misappropriations, misinterpretations and misunderstandings."

> **"CLAIMING NEUTRALITY IN THE HEALTHCARE SETTING IS IMPOSSIBLE. WHETHER ONE AFFIRMS OR DENIES THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF THE GOOD, ONE MUST ACT FOR AN END THAT THE AGENT APPREHENDS AS GOOD."**

Commenting on how pro-life bioethicists are treated by the profession, David Oderberg, in a 2008 essay for *Human Life Review*, wrote the following:

> Such thinkers have to be marginalized and demonized, and so they have been. This significant minority has been corralled into a corner, tarred with the brush of religious fundamentalism, and brought out into the light of day only for the occasional beating by the majority. They can have their little conferences and workshops, make their feeble protests, but then they are ritualistically stripped bare, flayed for the amusement of the multitude, and sent back into their corner.

It is in this context that the present books are written. As such, they represent an expansion of the Overton window; a counter flotilla, if you will, drifting on the seas of contemporary bioethics.

## FILLING THE GAP

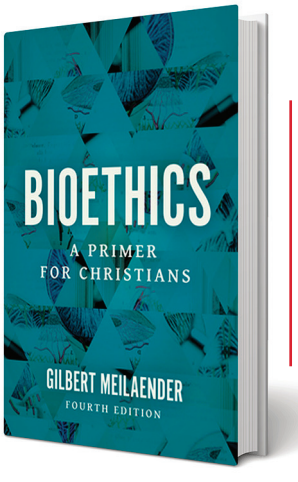
In *Bioethics for Nurses: A Christian Moral Vision*, the authors observe that medicine and bioethics are "most often organized in a way that is unfriendly—and sometimes even hostile—to those who want to practice medicine and/or bioethics on the basis of their explicit religious faith." Because of this hostility, there are very few if any bioethics books that address specific concerns "for the millions of Christian nurses." This book is meant to address this gap.

*Bioethics for Nurses* is ordered in three different parts. Briefly, the first part aims to situate nursing practice within the theological vision of Christianity. The point is to show not just that nursing practice was originally understood explicitly as representing Christ to the patient, but that the very actions of nursing practice *must* be understood as Christ-like. The atheist clinician is still doing *Christ's* work. Mack and Camosy cite Matthew 11:2–5 to make the point. When John the Baptist's followers ask Jesus for proof that he is the Messiah, Christ cites healthcare delivery as the principal evidence: The lame walk, the deaf hear, and the lepers are cleansed. Many religious orders in the first few centuries of Christianity considered healthcare delivery as a principle part of their charism. Mack and Camosy reference the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the fifth century, in which it states that "care of the sick is to be placed above and before every other duty."

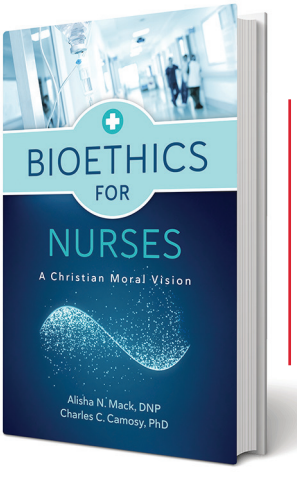
One can still *understand* a practice in ways that deviate from the *intrinsic telos* of the actions characteristic of that practice. For example, many

***View of a Foetus in the Womb* (c. 1510–1512), a detail of a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci**

understand OB/GYN practice to include abortion. But if OB/GYN practice is not to be understood as collapsing solely into internal medicine for women, the good of pre-born children must be a goal of that




***Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (4th ed.)**
By Gilbert Meilaender
(Eerdmans, 2020)




***Bioethics for Nurses: A Christian Moral Vision***
By Alisha N. Mack and Charles C. Camosy
(Eerdmans, 2022)


***St. John the Baptist Preaching* (c. 1665) by Mattia Preti**

practice. When an OB cares for a pregnant woman, she has two patients, not one. So, too, for nursing practice and Christ's model of selfless giving to the benefit of the whole person. The actions of a nurse recapitulate Christ's love for the sick, that is his or her *telos*. A secular understanding of nursing practice fails to plumb the depths of nursing actions to their Christ-like roots. One is reminded here of John the Evangelist's observations to the effect that "no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). When a nurse loves her patients, the patient doesn't see God but is touched by God nonetheless.

Understanding the axiological roots of nursing practice goes some way toward rebutting a purely secular understanding of it. A secular understanding of nursing practice artificially amputates its axiological foundation, which is to say the necessary value judgments inherent in the practice. On Mack and Camosy's view, a secular understanding is self-defeating. "There is simply no way for a healthcare provider to act for a patient's good…without having a vision of the good in the first place." Claiming neutrality in the healthcare setting is impossible. Whether one affirms or denies the Christian vision of the good, one must act for an end that the agent apprehends as good. But the secular understanding is a pollarded vision of nursing practice because it fails to recognize that nursing practice is one conduit through which God addresses the problem of suffering. Mack and Camosy note that "our acts [as Christian nurses] become bigger than caring and comforting and become a way for the hurting world to experience God through us."

## THE 7 HEAVENLY VIRTUES REIMAGINED

The second part of *Bioethics for Nurses* aims to reveal the seven ethical principles characteristic of Christian nursing practice: (1) human beings have equal dignity in virtue of all bearing the image and likeness of God; (2) human beings are living bodies, and therefore come into existence at conception; (3) human beings must *accept* death but never *produce* it or intentionally bring it about; (4) all human beings are equal before God; (5) the Christian clinician should privilege serving the marginalized and vulnerable in their practices; (6) a necessary feature of human flourishing is friendship; and (7) we must love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Though the first and fourth principles are conceptually redundant, practically speaking the upshot is captured in principle 5: human-created distinctions such as patients in a minimally conscious state having less worth than those who are fully conscious are inimical to the Christian vision of clinical practice. The human person, however disabled, is the central subject of one's loving actions. Such persons are at all points in their clinical stay *worthy* of our caring and attempts to cure.

Actual clinical cases that illustrate or are examples of the principle in question also highlight this section of the book. Some of the cases are illustrations of how the principle is violated. It is through reflection on what went wrong, on how the clinicians missed the mark, that one is reoriented to the true ethical goal for the case in question. The feel I got in reading this section is unlike reading a typical bioethics book. For the latter, I feel like I am considering an issue in the abstract—is the *type* of action—such as abortion—permissible? For the present text, I felt bedside, as if in the clinic myself.

The third part of the text explores some moral issues on the horizon of nursing practice. Included here are issues pertaining to conscience rights, the inclusion of nurses in the construction of care planning and hospital policy, and providing care when doing so may be directly harmful, as it was during the initial phases of COVID-19 (with limited PPE).

## A DISTINCTLY CHRISTIAN VISION

There is much to admire in this book. First, it is clearly one of a kind. It addresses several key points nicely. For example, in arguing for a space for a distinctively Christian nursing vision, the authors accurately note that a secular vision is not only incapable of providing one that has any philosophical motivation but has also acted hypocritically in expunging a Christian vision of nursing practice from bioethical discussion. The secular vision, too, has to make axiological assumptions. It cannot privilege those assumptions and in the same breath claim it is being inclusive; it cannot argue against conscience rights and in the same breath fail to explain why the autonomy of the patient is preeminent (and only when she requests abortion but not if she is suffering from body integrity identity disorder and requests amputation of healthy limbs), whereas the autonomy of the clinician means nothing.

The authors pitch the book to nurses and so steer away from rigorous philosophical analysis. A second admirable quality is that the book is very economical in this regard. It focuses on making the key points as clearly as possible but does not force the reader to get the point by extended argumentation. For example, they explain the "intention-foresee" distinction with a helpful thought experiment. Imagine extubating a patient for what is called a terminal wean—further respiratory support is futile and the patient is expected to die. Contrary to expectations, the patient breathes on her own. If you do not snuff her out, your intentions were not to have the patient die. You aimed to relieve the patient of a burdensome or nonbeneficial treatment. If you really intended that she die, you would find another means to accomplish that end. Most healthcare professionals do not suffocate their patients if they survive a wean off a ventilator, indicating what their original intention was. Again, this was written for nurses, not philosophers, and should be judged accordingly.

One way the book could be improved in subsequent editions would be to expand a bit more on the issue of including nurses into care planning and policymaking. One question I had throughout this discussion is "How?" In my experience in the hospital setting, many nurses knew more *important* information than the attending physician—for example, they knew the patient and the family better. However, I could barely see a way for this knowledge to be distributed given the culture and expectations of modern medicine.

In the end, *Bioethics for Nurses* introduces future Christian nurses to a beautiful moral vision for their vocation. For non-Christians and secular clinicians, the book is important for understanding a more robust moral vision for healthcare delivery.

## OUR LIMITS, OUR FINITUDE

Meilaender's *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (4th ed.) continues the same trend of limning the Christian vision of healthcare practice, but with a higher-resolution focus on specific issues—for example, euthanasia, IVF with intracytoplasmic sperm injection, abortion, CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing research, etc.

Whereas Mack and Camosy place the emphasis on healthcare's Christ-like roots specifically, the motif of caring for the whole person, Meilaender focuses attention on the fact that we are created beings who must obey the limits and finitude that accompany that ontological status. Whereas Mack and Camosy focus on Christ's moral teachings, Meilaender emphasizes the human person qua created being. The result is a lesson in humility, without the humiliation. When we ask ourselves first "what attitudes ought a *created being* have toward various developments in medical science?" notions such as acceptance, humility, and coming to terms with one's mortality come immediately to mind. Which is to say that domination, control, and mastery do not come to mind.

Here are a few examples highlighting this theme of humility that Meilaender weaves throughout the bioethical issues he discusses. On the topic of abortion, Meilaender thinks that Christianity's principal objection is not so much what is wrong about pro-abortion arguments but what is beautiful about the pro-life vision. Emphasis should be placed on the acceptance of life. "Life of the child in the womb is God's creation, and the child is part of the world Christ came to redeem.…Our continuing task, therefore, is to struggle to bring our judgments and feelings into accord with God's action—to let our estimate of the child be shaped and formed by God's." When discussing genetic modifications, either in the form of gene therapy on germline cells or genetic enhancements, Meilaender states: "We need the virtue of humility before the mystery of the human person and the succession of generations. We need the realization that the children who come after us are not simply a product for us to mold." On the issue of suicide he says that "Christians have held that suicide is morally wrong because they had seen in it a contradiction of our nature as creatures, an unwillingness to receive life moment by moment from the hand of God without ever regarding it as simply 'our' possession."

As for advanced directives, Meilaender argues *against* their use because they eliminate discussion about the patient's narrative and life story. "That is part of their [healthcare living wills] problem, for they free us from the need to deal with the ambivalence we feel in caring for a loved one who has now become a burdensome stranger." In the context of organ donation, Meilaender discusses the importance of the dead-donor rule: "Any solid organ donation…that would cause death or great harm to a living donor is not a proper work of *creaturely* love." Research on human subjects to tests drugs, devices, or surgical procedures must follow the path of humility as well. The ethical issue, of course, is that it is *research*. One is using human subjects to acquire knowledge about the safety and efficacy of a drug, device, or procedure. When the fight against death and disease employs war analogies, human subjects become means to the end of conquering illness. Into this utilitarian mindset, Meilaender speaks: "Placing our hope in the forward march of medical research, we deceive ourselves into imagining that it could be redemptive, that it might overcome the sting of death. In short, we fashion the golden calf of research medicine." These quotations illustrate how the motif of humility is woven throughout. One gets a sense of how Meilaender is thinking about these issues, and it is a very refreshing perspective to say the least.

A few interesting points emerge from Meilaender's discussion of prenatal screening. He notes that it can be put to good use, "but we deceive ourselves if we suppose that as a routine feature of medical practice, it can simply assist the couple to prepare themselves for the child's birth. It does exactly the opposite. It

"MEILAENDER FOCUSES ATTENTION ON THE FACT THAT WE ARE CREATED BEINGS WHO MUST OBEY THE LIMITS AND FINITUDE THAT ACCOMPANY THAT ONTOLOGICAL STATUS."

**Bas-relief at Angkor Wat, Cambodia (c. 1150), depicting a demon inducing an abortion by pounding the abdomen of a pregnant woman with a pestle**

sets our foot on a path that is difficult to exit.…The technology carries its own momentum.…It prepares us not for the kind of commitment that parenthood requires, an unconditional commitment." Similar to Mack and Camosy's point above about the intrinsic *teloi* of nursing practice, Meilaender sees intrinsic *teloi* to certain procedures and medical technologies. One could understand prenatal screening as simply satisfying a desire to seek knowledge about the child, but it is only with effort that one can hold on to the unconditional acceptance of the child. The practice itself works to extinguish or quell such attitudes.

Although Meilaender pitches the book to Christians, he explicitly invites others to "listen in." I think this undersells the book's importance. In his discussion of reproductive technologies (IVF in particular), Meilaender writes:

> If, by contrast, we come to think of the child as a product of our reason and will, we have lost the deepest ground of human equality—and, perhaps as important, missed the meaning of the human act of love. A child who is thus begotten, not made, embodies the union of his father and mother.…Their love giving has been life giving: it is truly *pro*creation."

If children are treated as objects at the origins of their inception, how could that not affect our moral intuitions downstream? *Anyone* concerned about preserving the ideological grounds for human equality ought to be deeply concerned and familiar with the Christian moral vision in bioethics. Whether unconscious, minimally conscious, or fully conscious, born or pre-born, frail and elderly or strong and young, all are indeed *persons*. We might be disabled, but we are disabled persons; we might have a debilitating disease, but we are still persons with the disease. We are all worthy of care, even if we cannot be cured. Meilaender could have said, "Others *should* listen in."

This is the fourth edition of Meilaender's *Bioethics* and so some comment about the topics discussed and changes from previous editions is warranted. Meilaender notes that this addition includes a discussion of CRISPR/Cas9, a gene-editing technique, and he has expanded the discussion of conscience

rights. As with previous editions, the core issues of concern particularly to Christians are addressed in this relatively small volume—namely, abortion and euthanasia. What moral criteria should govern the withdrawal of life support? When is it permissible to extract vital organs from a donor? When is it permissible to perform more than minimal risk research on human subjects? What moral criteria should govern the treating of infertility? This is not an exhaustive list, but it constitutes the *core* concerns of Christians. Meilaender navigates these issues with a very readable text and a sense of unity. The centrality of the human person and the humility proper to our status as creatures reverberates throughout the text.

Though this is the fourth edition, I would still have liked to have seen some updating in the following regard. As with previous editions, Meilaender thinks that abortion is permissible in certain circumstances, namely sexual assault. I don't think this is the Christian view of things, but if it were, it would not be for the reasons Meilaender states. He correctly argues that pre-born human beings are full persons and are formally innocent. In the context of sexual assault, according to Meilaender, the pre-born human being may continue "to represent in vivid form the attack the woman suffered." The Christian ethical tradition has typically resisted making moral judgments based on how people are "represented" or seen. Human history is littered with acts of genocide and systematic oppression. None of these actions could have been undertaken unless the perpetrators *represented* their victims as something other than the human persons they are. However pre-born persons may be seen or represented *as*, they are in truth persons. How one person may be "represented" to another is not sufficient justification for violent actions against them. But this is a single blemish on an otherwise insightful, readable, and very wise text.

"IF CHILDREN ARE TREATED AS OBJECTS AT THE ORIGINS OF THEIR INCEPTION, HOW COULD THAT NOT AFFECT OUR MORAL INTUITIONS DOWNSTREAM?"

## SEEING THE DIVINE IN THE HUMAN

I close this review essay with a few reflections on what exactly is specifically *Christian* about Christian bioethics. That requires thinking about the Incarnation. From Scripture and tradition, we can derive that Christ's assumption of humanity was not just metaphysically possible but also *fitting*. Human nature is a fitting receptacle for divinity. Jesus even quotes Psalm 82:6, reiterating the notion that we are "gods," and the long-standing teaching in both the Eastern and Western churches is that the end point for the Christian is to become like God, to become deified, to move from the image of God to His likeness. Deification is not just *possible*; it's our *calling*.

This implies something profound about humanity. If humanity is called to participate in divinity, it must be ontologically possible for it to do so—with God's transforming grace of course. But if it is possible, humanity bears, in some sense, an imprint of divinity.

The Incarnation also implies something profound about God's intentions. God wanted to assume humanity. If we ask why the Incarnation occurred, it is that God desired to descend so that we may ascend. God desires union with *me*. Homicide, battery, and other injustices against the human person are also forms of deicide and sacrilege. We are not worthwhile simply because we can function well or that our so-called quality of life is satisfactory. We are worthwhile because of what we *are*, not in virtue of what we can *do*. That humanity bears an imprint of divinity and that God desired union with us entails that we have our worth at all points in which we exist. We have it prior to reaching certain developmental milestones of human nature. We have our worth, our inherent irreplaceable worth, whether others recognize it or even whether a specific person recognizes it.

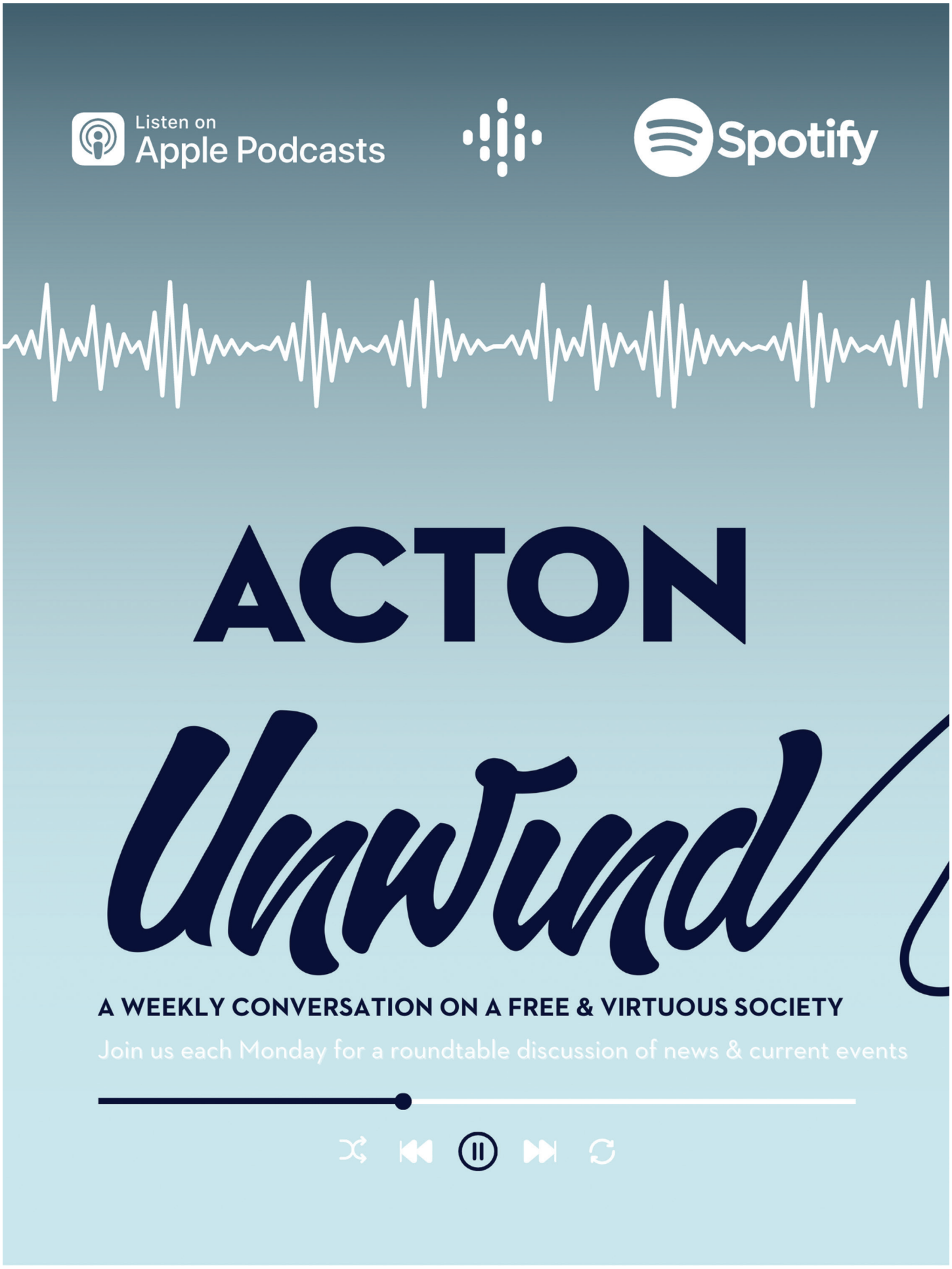
Naturalism has a very hard time accounting for these objective and universal moral facts. William Fitzpatrick, in "Morality and Evolutionary Biology," asserts the following: "On the face of it, the mere fact that natural selection would not have 'designed' our moral faculties to track moral truths accurately (as it plausibly designed our perceptual faculties to track [perceptual] facts…) *is not obviously problematic*" (emphasis mine). It is quite plausible to suppose that unguided evolutionary mechanisms would not select for cognitive faculties that are able to apprehend the deontic (i.e., obligatory) quality of moral judgments, assuming that we would form faculties for making moral judgments at all. Michael Rea in his *World Without Design* comments on the relationship between naturalism and believing necessary judgments as follows.

> Believing mathematical falsehoods, logical falsehoods, and conceptual falsehoods might result in failure to survive and reproduce. But how could there be any evolutionary advantage associated with having true beliefs about the modal status of these propositions? So long as one believes that 2+2 = 4 will *always* be true, it does not seem to matter whether one also believes that it is *necessarily* true.

Similar thoughts apply to the relationship between naturalism and obligatory moral judgments. We make moral judgments often enough, and a subset of those judgments are judgments to the effect that certain actions *ought* never to be done. Likewise, there are certain actions of the sort that must be done in certain circumstances. The "ought" or "must" of our moral judgments I refer to as their deontic quality. The key point is that there is no reason given unguided evolutionary mechanisms to think that we would develop cognitive faculties that cue us to apprehend the deontic quality of moral judgments. Conversely, a good and loving God who desired that we treat all human beings equally in the face of biases, conflicts of interests, etc., would dispose us to see the deontic quality of certain actions. If one is an atheist, she *can* believe that the human person has inherent dignity that ought never be blemished, but she is not *required* to think this. (Many atheists coherently deny that persons have inherent dignity.) The Christian, however, must believe that the inherent dignity she sees in persons must be respected, and she has every reason to believe that what she sees is what God intends her to see.

Both *Bioethics for Nurses: A Christian Moral Vision* and *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* deserve inclusion in an undergraduate class in Christian ethics. I would strongly recommend considering Mack and Camosy's work for a nursing ethics course, and reserve Meilaender's work for a bioethics course. I make this distinction because some of the issues with which Meilaender deals are not directly applicable to nursing practice. And, again, my strong recommendation does not change whether one is secular or religious. RL

***Stephen Napier, Ph.D.**, is associate professor of philosophy at Villanova University.*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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

# Robert Nisbet: Tradition & Community

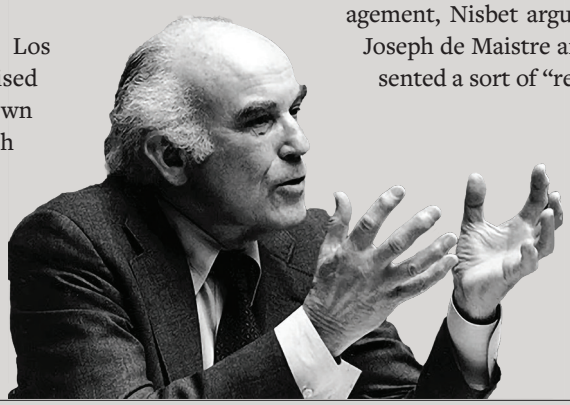
by SAMUEL GOLDMAN

"TO THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENTIST," observed Robert Nisbet (1913–1996), "to be labeled a conservative is more often to be damned than praised." Already evident when he published it in 1952, Nisbet's comment is even more accurate today. Surveys from the past decade have found that close to two thirds of undergraduate faculty call themselves far left or liberal, compared to about 13% who identify as conservative or far right. The disproportion is more pronounced at elite universities and in particular fields.

Both then and now, protests against these conditions tend to focus on political consequences, including accusations that students are subject to indoctrination. For Nisbet, the principal danger of marginalizing conservative thinkers and ideas was primarily intellectual. The modern study of human behavior is built on distinctive concepts, including status, norm, symbol, ritual. And these concepts—without which the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and social psychology are hardly conceivable—emerged from a largely European tradition of conservatism that American scholars barely recognized, even for purposes of dismissal.

Nisbet's mission was to revive that tradition. He did not expect that his efforts would directly contribute to electoral or policy victories by the organized conservative movement, with which he had a close but sometimes tense relationship. He did hope to combat what he called "the degradation of the academic dogma," or the rejection of the principle that teachers and scholars should pursue knowledge for its own sake.

Nisbet was born in Los Angeles but raised mostly in the oil town of Maricopa, which he described as a "hostile challenge to the human spirit." He found Macon, Georgia, where his paternal grandparents lived and his family briefly moved, more congenial. Prefiguring his conservatism, Nisbet admired the Deep South as an American bastion of personal (as opposed to legal) authority and traditional community. He later recounted that the Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* made a deep impression on him, although he still considered himself on the left when it appeared in 1930.



After completing high school, Nisbet enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. Except for a stint of military service during World War II, he would remain at Berkeley as an undergraduate, graduate, student, and professor until 1953 and in the University of California system as an administrator until 1972.

Although Nisbet moved on to other institutions, these California affiliations are not just a biographical detail. For Nisbet, "Old Berkeley" was the very model of a modern university. Free from the social ambitions that dominated famous East Coast colleges and publicly funded with a minimum of oversight, students and faculty at Cal were free to devote themselves to learning—as well as to recreation in a shabby but convivial environment that Nisbet affectionately recalled. If every conservatism is rooted in some sense of loss, Nisbet's version was driven partly by his belief that this academic utopia had been undermined by the imposition of alien military, economic, and eventually ideological imperatives.

Nisbet's education at Berkeley was dominated by the influence of Frederick J. Teggart, a former historian turned professor of "social institutions" who advised his doctoral thesis on "The Social Group in French Thought" in 1939. With Teggart's encouragement, Nisbet argued that figures including Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald represented a sort of "reactionary enlightenment" that exposed the true basis of human society in relations among religious, kin, and other groups rather than the abstracted individual. Many of the themes

that emerged more clearly in Nisbet's 1953 masterpiece, *The Quest for Community*, were already present in his dissertation. Missing in the earlier work are thinkers who, Nisbet would come to believe, successfully mediated the abstraction of liberalism and the reactionaries' authoritarianism. The dissertation says nothing of either Edmund Burke or Alexis de Tocqueville—at that time, an almost forgotten figure.

Tocqueville, especially, became key to the perspective Nisbet would dub conservative pluralism. A "monist" society was one that tried to enforce a uniform legal regime and pattern of life, usually by means of violent coercion. A "pluralist" society, by contrast, would permit different institutions and communities to pursue separate purposes in different ways, binding them together only when and as necessary to achieve truly shared purposes. The *anomie* or alienation famously diagnosed by Émile Durkheim, Nisbet argued in *The Quest for Community*, stems from the suppression of local, religious, or (in Europe) feudal orders with the pseudo-community of the nation-state.

Nisbet's anti-statism was congenial to the nascent American conservative movement. Yet his suspicion of militarism and nationalism also offered a certain affinity to the New Left. Nisbet's objection to the student radicals was not so much that they challenged U.S. foreign policy or the bland conformity of midcentury popular culture. It was that they did so in the name of further liberation of the individual. What was needed was not more personal independence with regard to sex, drug use, or other behaviors but a "new laissez faire" of groups, that allowed traditional institutions such as universities to select, cultivate, and, when necessary, discipline their own members. This was precisely the authority that the new student movements rejected.

By the 1970s, Nisbet saw few prospects for salutary pluralism. His later works revolve around themes of progress and decline. Western civilization was in a "twilight" phase, in which the capital accumulated in previous eras was expended without being replenished. Although he was a scathing critic of deterministic theories of historical change, Nisbet worried that waning confidence in the possibility of improvement was a social disaster. Since Americans were never characterized by a strong interest in the past, loss of faith in a better future left them even more disoriented and desperate for quick but illusory fixes.

Although he remained affiliated with conservative institutions and wrote for conservative publications, Nisbet did not exempt the conservative movement from his pessimistic analysis. Like his heroes Tocqueville and Durkheim, Nisbet respected the social and cultural achievements associated with religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. But he was dismayed by the Reagan-era religious right, which he saw as petty, vulgar, and bullying. Nisbet did not necessarily oppose school prayer, restrictions on abortion, or other policies favored by largely evangelical Christian conservatives. But he saw the attempt to impose them at the national level as an expression of the monism he rejected on the left.

When he died in 1993, Nisbet was more obscure than he'd been a few decades earlier. As with his contemporary Russell Kirk, Nisbet's intellectual, impractical, vaguely European brand of conservatism had little natural audience among the American political class. Nisbet's thought was more naturally at home in the universities he loved. By that time, however, the arguments he mounted and sources he revered were even less popular than at the beginning of his career. The cause was not limited to ideological imbalance. As Nisbet had warned for decades, the shift of professional incentives from undergraduate teaching to specialized research, and from curatorial to inquisitorial modes of scholarship, proved stifling to the academic imagination.

Yet Nisbet's sociological diagnosis seems more relevant now than ever. For all the pathologies linked to social media and identity politics, it seems clear that they're responses to the vacuum of community that Nisbet diagnosed many years ago. We must either find a way to channel unavoidable demands for meaning and belonging into families and other embodied communities that provide what Christopher Lasch called a "haven in a heartless world" or see them played out as escalating and counterproductive bids for centralized power. The task has only gotten harder since Nisbet described it in *The Quest for Community*. But it remains the central task of our twilight age. RL

***Samuel Goldman*** *is an associate professor of political science at George Washington University, where he is also executive director of the John L. Loeb, Jr. Institute for Religious Freedom and director of the Politics & Values Program. Goldman received his Ph.D. from Harvard and taught at Harvard and Princeton before coming to GW. He is also an affiliate scholar for the Acton Institute.*

People watch Donald Trump deliver his victory speech on TV in New York City in 2016. Photo by Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo.

# When Ideology Trumps Scholarship

**David Hollinger is a scholar of note, but his most recent contribution to the discussion about evangelicalism in America betrays his political hobbyhorses more than insights into a diverse group of Christian believers.**

by **PHILIP JENKINS**

**SOME REVIEWS ARE** difficult to write. Responding to David Hollinger's *Christianity's American Fate*, I initially used a tone that was wholly mocking and sarcastic, because the book is, from so many points of view, a dreadful piece of work. I backtracked on that somewhat because I genuinely respect the author's earlier writings and, moreover, the present book has some portions that are really thoughtful, which I will certainly be citing in future. Please appreciate my dilemma when I say that Hollinger's book is not as *completely* awful as it first appears.

Hollinger's argument can be summarized thus. Donald Trump's presidency, and the political movement associated with it, were and are a political, spiritual, and cultural catastrophe. Trump's success was rooted in the support of religious conservatives, or as Hollinger mainly describes them, white evangelicals. Beyond falling prey to sinister political temptations, those believers frequently and consistently reject science and even objective reality:

> Christianity has become an instrument for the most politically, culturally, and theologically reactionary Americans. White evangelical Protestants were an indispensable foundation for Donald Trump's presidency and have become the core of the Republican Party's electoral strength. They are the most conspicuous advocates of "Christian nationalism."…Most of Christianity's symbolic capital has been seized by a segment of the population committed to ideas about the Bible, the family, and civics that most other Americans reject.

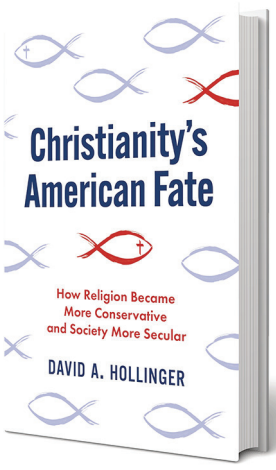
The question, then, is how so many Americans became Marching Morons, which Hollinger helpfully expounds by contrast with mainline Protestants. He actually calls these mainliners "ecumenical" Protestants, a change that produces no obvious advantage. The deliberately retro term harks back to the ecumenical movement that was a hot button item for ecclesiastical bureaucrats a couple of generations ago.

"Ecumenical Protestants" benefited from their greater educational advantages, and the flourishing of universities in northern and midwestern states during the 19th century and after. At no stage does Hollinger seem to acknowledge the egregious class prejudice that permeates every word of his account of how us fine chaps achieved our present state of moral and intellectual perfection, while the peasants remained in the mire. Surely, those "ecumenicals" might object, our trust funds alone can't account for the difference?

It is hard to know where to begin approaching this rant. One basic problem is that Hollinger not only does not define most key terms; he actively mocks attempts to do so. What, for instance, is an evangelical? There are actually some excellent attempts to do this, most famously by David Bebbington in the four points of his "quadrilateral"—conversionism, crucicentrism, activism, and biblicism. If the model is not perfect, it is very useful. It also clearly shows that the term *evangelical* is not affiliated with any political package or racial ideology. Historically, most black Protestant churches were, and are, thoroughly evangelical, and Latinos and Asian Protestants likewise. Hollinger quotes the quadrilateral, and then huffily declares

> that this has some value for understanding the doctrinal history of at least part of evangelicalism across the centuries. But this sense of "true" evangelicalism elides the entire history of fundamentalist and evangelical connections with business-friendly individualism. Missing, too, from the quadrilateral is the vibrant tradition of premillennial dispensationalism, according to which evangelicals were encouraged to accept wildly implausible ideas, making QAnon's theories seem less strange than they otherwise would be.

Where do you start? He takes a word that means something, then adds commentaries on some aspects of evangelical history (the business linkage) and asserts out of nowhere that they are the indispensable heart of the matter. He then suggests, simply wrongly, that premillennialism is a basic part of the evangelical message. It is for some but not for others. Throughout this book, Hollinger's "evangelicals" should properly be understood as meaning "some right-wing activists affiliated with religion, with whom I disagree strongly, and you know them when you see them." His argument proceeds from there, in perfect circularity.




*Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular*

By David A. Hollinger

(Princeton University Press, 2022)

Hollinger is also—shall we say, unintentionally—entertaining on the topic of conspiracy theories and the rejection of scientific consensus.

> Millions of Americans believe patent falsehoods and live in epistemic enclosures that keep them from hearing even the most well-substantiated and carefully explained truths about vaccines, climate change, election outcomes, immigration, and a host of other matters of great public concern.

Note the dichotomy here. There are us normal people, Democrats and liberals, who accept the world as it is, as proven by objective expert science. Then there are far-right religious flakes.

As Hollinger almost says, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, or even as this Republican!"

But it is not hard to find many conspiracy theories espoused by liberals and the left, not to mention cases in which the same groups flout "well-substantiated and carefully explained truths." QAnon has no monopoly on nonsense. Such instances reflect the sinister power of social media and the mob mentalities that they generate, for left and right alike. They

are nothing to do with Christianity or with evangelical theology.

While on the subject of harmful mythologies, we might turn to Hollinger's fundamental thesis that the Christian right, under whatever name, has seized "most of Christianity's symbolic capital." What does that actually mean? Who says? It is an excellent statement of the worldview of contemporary American left/liberals, who, whenever they see religion in public life, immediately think of the darkest stereotypes of far-right megachurch extremists. It has no necessary connection with the actual profile of U.S. Christianity, in which Roman Catholics remain the largest single contingent, nor does it address the many evangelicals and Pentecostals who are centrist or left in orientation. Who declared that those believers have suddenly forfeited their symbolic capital?

How American liberals came to their bizarre perceptions about that supposed rightist takeover of Christianity is actually an interesting tale. One critical moment came after Trump's shocking victory in 2016, which drove serious heart-searching about the roots of that amazing phenomenon. Journalists, political scientists, sociologists, and ethnographers plunged into the deepest recesses of the Rustbelt states, and over the next couple of years they produced a series of striking books about the State of the Nation. They still make fascinating reading. These accounts focus on economic disasters and disappointments, which transformed cultural attitudes, and concepts of class occur very frequently. From my own personal observations in the decisive swing state of Pennsylvania, I was repeatedly stunned by the militant class consciousness of Trump supporters and their incandescent fury against "rich bastards" and what they had done to the country and the culture. Class anger was running at a level that might have persuaded Leon Trotsky to tell people to calm down a bit before they did something stupid. Surprisingly scarce in those various investigative accounts of Trump Country was the overt theme of race, except insofar as people complained that the said rich bastards were using immigrants to undercut wages. Nor, very noticeably, did religion play any significant role.

**Ecumenism symbol from a plaque in St. Anne's Church in Augsburg, Germany**

For liberals, this was genuinely scary stuff, not least in portraying Trump supporters as fairly rational actors and not as crypto-Klansmen. Clutching at what hope they could find, the media increasingly turned their attention to surveys showing the evangelical identification of a sizable number of Trumpists and other hard rightists. Breathing a sigh of relief, journalists and academics could now present the right as slaves of cynical Elmer Gantry preachers and snake-oil salesmen. I will just repeat a point that Hollinger scorns, but it is crucial: Those surveys count self-identification as evangelicals and not actual members or attenders of evangelical churches.

No credible evidence shows that this evangelical association persuaded or influenced people to vote in particular ways. We might equally postulate that people voted as they did for their own particular reasons and interests, as they understood them—and oh, by the way, they lived in communities and social networks where people happened to be evangelical. Correlation is not causation. You might also point out that Trump voters in 2016 drove very different vehicles from Clinton supporters. That fact reflected different levels of wealth and (by implication) of the education levels that contributed to higher incomes, but of itself it had no causal quality. Only an idiot would suggest that possessing a pickup truck made people vote for Trump, as opposed to being a common feature among people who behaved thus.

Let me offer an analogy. Overwhelmingly, black Americans vote for Democrats, and they do so for reasons that are rational and comprehensible. They vote out of perceptions of their self-interest, both economic and cultural. If you ask those black voters about their religious loyalties, a large number will report being members of historically black Protestant churches, which, as I remarked, are commonly evangelical or Pentecostal. This does not necessarily mean that membership in such churches forms political attitudes. Rather, people have the politics they do, and they also follow given religious practices. Historically, those churches certainly did guide political development, supplying leadership and social networks. But if those churches vanished tomorrow,

“THE MOST NOTABLE ELEMENT OF MODERN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY IS THE DECISIVE ACCEPTANCE BY MOST DENOMINATIONS OF VALUES THAT ONLY A COUPLE OF GENERATIONS AGO WOULD HAVE BEEN REGARDED AS LIBERAL OR EVEN RADICAL.”

and black Americans suddenly secularized en masse, there is no suggestion that this would change political beliefs or voting patterns. Very sadly to note, the decline of institutional religion among those very black Americans likely means we will be observing such a process at work over the next couple of decades.

Hollinger's book has the advantage of brevity (that is not a snide comment; writing concisely is an enviable quality). But every page invites challenge and refutation. Even the subtitle is ridiculous: “How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular.” The whole book focuses on Christianity, or rather a subset of it he believes to have become Hard Right. Yet oddly, here, he is suddenly pontificating on “Religion.” So let's play by his rules and address Christianity alone as synonymous with “religion.” The most notable element of modern American Christianity is the decisive acceptance by most denominations of values that only a couple of generations ago would have been regarded as liberal or even radical. Today it is absolutely unacceptable for any but the weirdest fringe sects to preach racial division or denounce “miscegenation.” Even if many churches will not accept same-sex marriages, virtually none preach that gays and lesbians are in any sense sick, diseased, or harmful. At the level of ordinary congregations, as opposed to hierarchies, many surveys have shown that sympathy for gay marriages and families runs very high, including among otherwise conservative denominations. It's all part of American religion becoming less conservative.

The flaws of Hollinger's book are agonizingly obvious. So why do I cite any positive qualities? In my view, Hollinger has bought into an unsubstantiated model of political reality that is thoroughly ideologically driven. Yet he is certainly correct about society as a whole becoming more secular, and he makes some fair comments about the evidence for people leaving religions and identifying their religious affiliation as “None.” The Nones became a major force at the turn of the century and presently constitute almost 30% of the population, the largest bloc in terms of religious identity. Recent surveys by the Pew Research Center suggest that they could constitute an overall majority within a few decades. There is a real phenomenon here, which probably does owe something to people accepting some of the horror stories he outlines in the book. Hollinger understands the issues well and offers an effective survey of the current literature.

On occasion, too, you still see flashes of the outstanding scholar and historian who has made so many major contributions. Just to take two examples: He offers a chapter on the influence of American missionaries on changing fundamental perceptions of other faiths and, by implication, the races that followed them. That then contributed massively to the liberalization of those “ecumenical” mainliners. This is basically taken from his 2017 study *Protestants Abroad*, but it remains a superb contribution to the subject. He is also very good on the significance of the very strong Jewish role in culture and politics during the 20th century, and how that undermined traditional notions of Protestant hegemony. That contributed to what “ecumenicals” were already confronting and coming to terms with.

Those two chapters, on the Jews and the “missionary boomerang,” are wise and well argued. I dearly wish the same insightful historian was more in evidence elsewhere in this present book. RL

***Philip Jenkins*** *is a Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University, where he serves in the Institute for Studies of Religion. His most recent book is* He Will Save You from the Deadly Pestilence: The Many Lives of Psalm 91.

Portrait of Ivan IV by Viktor Vasnetsov, 1897

# Lutherans Under Communism

**The persecution of Christians by the old Soviet regime seems both overwhelming and lost in time. Yet it began by the slow erosion of religious liberty we're seeing here and now.**

by **GENE EDWARD VEITH**

**LUTHERANS HAVE BEEN** in Russia since the time of the Reformation. Ivan the Terrible, wanting to bring Russia into the 16th century, invited German craftsmen and tradesmen to settle in the country. He allowed the first Lutheran church to be built just outside Moscow in 1576. Four years later, he ordered it to be burned down.

That sums up conditions for Russian Lutherans under the czars. Sometimes they were favored; at other times, repressed. Until the 20th century, it was illegal for any ethnic Russian to have any religion other than Russian Orthodoxy.

And yet the czars had a habit of marrying Lutheran princesses—though a condition of the marriage was that she convert to Orthodoxy—a practice continuing all the way to the final ill-fated holder of that office, who was married to Alexandra of Hesse. Peter the Great was married not to a princess but to a Lutheran serving girl; one of those Lutheran princesses, however, would become Catherine the Great. Both of these "Great" monarchs brought into the country large numbers of Lutheran farmers, merchants, and well-educated professionals.

The Germans were not the only Lutherans in Russia. The Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union included the staunchly Lutheran Ingrians, Estonians, and Latvians, as well as a smattering of Finns, Swedes, and Lutheran Armenians. By the 1917 revolution, there were 3,674,000 Lutherans scattered throughout Russian cities, villages, and the vast countryside.

*The Gates of Hell* by Matthew Heise, director of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation and a long-time

> THE BOLSHEVIKS PROCLAIMED FREEDOM OF RELIGION BUT ONLY AS A PRIVATE MATTER; ALL RELIGION HAD TO DISAPPEAR FROM THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

*The Bolshevik* (1920) by Boris Kustodiev

missionary in the region from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, is a history of the Lutheran church in Russia from the time of the Bolshevik Revolution to World War II. The book is a gripping and instructive account of the state's efforts to use economic, cultural, legal, and violent means to exterminate a church.

## CLASS STRUGGLE VS. THE GOLDEN RULE

At first, with the czar's restrictions lifted, the Lutherans flourished. They managed to organize themselves into one church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, with two bishops. They opened a seminary in Leningrad. They worked with American government and church-related relief agencies in the famine and food shortage that followed the revolution.

Then the Bolsheviks began to implement their anti-religion policies. They proclaimed freedom of religion but only as a private matter; all religion had to disappear from the public square. They confiscated church property, took over all schools, and censored religious publications.

Priests and pastors were labeled "non-productive elements," since they engaged in no physical or other productive labor, and so were excluded from the "workers' paradise." They were described as "former persons," along with czarist aristocrats and functionaries of the old regime. As such, they had no rights of citizenship, could not vote, were given no food rations, lost their parsonages, and had to pay higher taxes. In addition, their children were not allowed to attend universities.

In response, church members, many of whom also lost their homes and farms, tithed like never before to support their pastors and their congregations. Lutherans from other countries, especially the Russian Germans who had migrated to the American Midwest, sent contributions.

Then came Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, in 1929, one of whose goals was the complete elimination of Christianity in Russia. The main target was the very belief in God, which violated the Marxist tenets of "scientific materialism."

But the Communist Party sought also to erase Christian ethics. "Love your neighbor" violated the Marxist principle of "class struggle." Thus, pastors could be charged with "preaching class peace." Lutherans had an extensive network to help the poor and the disabled, but this was held to compete with the state and to keep the deprived "in thrall to their exploiters." Consequently, the church was defined as an enemy of the state. One of the Lutheran bishops summed up the goal: "Everything that is connected to the Christian faith *or reminds one of it* must disappear from the life of the people and its individual citizens."

It wasn't just a matter of punishing church leaders and other religious believers for "anti-Soviet activities" or for being "counter-revolutionaries." Communists assumed that religion would simply die

out if they could prevent it from being transmitted to children. But even more than that, the very reminders of religion—the very *memory* that there used to be a religion—had to be erased.

Although Heise chronicles what happened specifically among the Lutherans, as their ethnic identities and foreign ties brought on an additional level of persecution, the Communists' primary target was the Orthodox Church, which was woven into the fabric of Russian culture. Most of the anti-religion policies he describes were carried out against not only Lutherans and Orthodox, but also Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Jews, and Muslims, as well as other religious minorities.

## ERASING THE SABBATH, CRUSHING THE SPIRIT

In an effort to make religion disappear, the Party imposed a new, five-day week, with four days of work, then one day off. The cycle was staggered so that the day off fell on different days for different individuals. The purpose was to eliminate Sunday. The day set apart for worship ceased to exist. But churches responded by meeting once a week at night.

Taxes were weaponized. Exorbitant taxes were levied on religious workers and institutions, including a special tax "to support atheist culture." Heise records a church in 1928 having to pay taxes of 393 rubles; in 1931, it had to pay 3,609 rubles. Other economic sanctions were designed to force churches out of existence. Churches had to pay up to 22 times the normal rate for utilities. When a congregation could no longer pay its taxes and other fees—and eventually none of them could—its building would be taken over by the state, to be converted to a factory, a theater, or, in the case of St. Peter's in Leningrad, an indoor swimming pool.

The new policy forbade churches from holding religious instruction for children. So pastors met in their apartments with Sunday school teachers to go over the lessons for the week. The Sunday school teachers then met with children in their apartments.

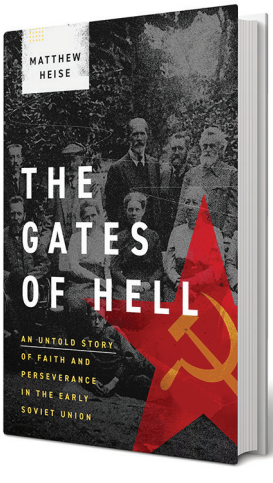
But informers from the League of the Militant Godless uncovered this work-around. The pastors responsible were arrested. So were the elderly women and teenage girls who taught Sunday school. They were sent to penal labor camps for as long as 10 years. Seventy-year-old pastors and aged church ladies were given picks and shovels to dig out Stalin's arctic canal. The elderly died in the brutal conditions, but the younger pastors and young women who survived completed their sentences, after which they returned to their church work.

In 1937 a government poll was taken designed to measure the success of the anti-religion policies. Citizens were asked, "Do you believe in God?" Despite the elimination of Sunday worship, the restrictions on religious teaching, and the suppression of the church, a *majority* of Russians—56.7%—not only said yes but were bold enough to admit it despite the consequences, as some respondents lost their jobs or their university enrollment because they professed their belief in God.

The Communists were flabbergasted. So they launched a more thorough wave of persecution, targeting not only pastors but also choir directors, organists, and ordinary laypeople. And they increased the use of the death penalty.

## THE GERMAN FACTOR

The German Lutherans faced yet another danger. Once Hitler came into power and World War II approached, Stalin declared that *all* German citizens and Russians of German origin were subject to arrest. They were *all* suspected of Nazism and of spying for Germany. The NKVD—the predecessor of the KGB—began rounding up pastors and church members. The donations the Lutheran church had received from foreign churches became *prima facie* evidence of treason, subversion, and espionage. Church youth groups were defined as Nazi cells. Sermons were interpreted as pro-Nazi agitation. In at least one case, a pastor's preaching on "the Kingdom of God" was interpreted as a symbolic reference to the Third Reich.




*The Gates of Hell: An Untold Story of Faith and Perseverance in the Early Soviet Union*

By Matthew Heise

(Lexham Press, 2022)

One might wonder whether there was, in fact, something to those charges. Heise, who had access to the records of NKVD interrogations, gives evidence of torture and coercion but also some confessions. Might German nationalism and support for Hitler have filtered into Russia? But Heise uncovers two confessions from NKVD agents, including the chief interrogator of the Leningrad Lutherans who was himself arrested years later and admitted that the cases against the believers were all fabricated and that the recorded testimonies were written by the officers themselves. As it turned out, the NKVD, like other elements of the Soviet economy, had quotas to fill.

In Stalin's "German operation," some 42,000 Russian citizens of German background were executed. Still more, including entire villages, were put into boxcars and shipped to Siberia. Nevertheless, Heise records the astonishing faith of the pastors and laity who persisted even as the persecutions got worse and worse. We read about the seminary, whose students kept coming, even though they knew that upon their ordination they would become "former persons," lose all their rights, and be targeted themselves for arrest and possible execution. Still, they kept studying. The seminary had to spend half its budget on taxes. One by one the professors got arrested. Yet, when no more were left, the administrators started teaching their classes.

Bishop Meier, knowing that before long no church buildings would be available and the last pastor would soon be gone, began teaching parishioners how to keep the faith alive without clergy. He taught his people how to baptize, how to conduct weddings and funerals, how to teach their children the catechism, how to come together for prayer and worship.

On November 27, 1937, the last pastor was killed.

## *GLASNOST* AND THE GOSPEL

Heise's book ends with the apparent extinction of the Lutheran Church and the beginning of World War II. It doesn't continue with the story of those Lutherans in Siberia and elsewhere who did what the bishop had taught, preserving and handing down their faith by means of the ordinary practices still performed today by Lutherans everywhere—learning the catechism by heart, learning the hymns, memorizing Bible verses—and carrying out the priesthood of all believers by worshiping and baptizing.

Heise does, though, include an epilogue, which jumps past the postwar years to Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policies and to the collapse of the Soviet Union. During that time, the victims of Stalin's "Great Terror," including the Lutherans, were cleared of the accusations against them. Survivors and their children and grandchildren came out into the open and identified as Lutheran. They organized into congregations. Church property, including the "swimming pool" church, was restored to them. The old, vandalized buildings once again became houses of worship. They had pastors again. Just as Jesus promised of His body, the church, the gates of hell did not prevail against the church in Russia.

In reading this chronicle of persecution, we can't help but see the parallels, faint now but real, with today's leftist opponents of religious liberty. Religion can be tolerated only if it remains inside a person's head and is neither acted upon nor expressed in the public square. "Everything that is connected to the Christian faith *or reminds one of it* must disappear." Children should be indoctrinated against the beliefs of their parents. Religion is only a mask for oppression. And we see how religion can be persecuted not only through violence but also through economic sanctions (threatening churches with the tax code), cultural pressures (undermining the values Christians try to instill in their children), and the law (punishing those who won't conform to the prevailing secularist ideology).

Reading this book is a heart-wrenching but inspiring experience. It begins with the mundane efforts to bring Russian Lutherans into one church body, so we hear about meetings, fundraising, personality conflicts, and church politics. This is the ordinary stuff of the "institutional church" that so many American Christians are tired of. But then the pressures begin and intensify, grow worse and worse, more and more lethal. Yet we see these ordinary pastors, church ladies, Sunday school teachers, youth group members—so very much like those we know in our own congregations—holding on to Christ, trusting in God's Word, no matter what the NKVD does to them, and becoming blessed martyrs, and in some cases even living witnesses. RL

***Gene Edward Veith*** *is provost emeritus at Patrick Henry College, where he also served as professor of literature and interim president. He is currently the director of the Cranach Institute at Concordia Theological Seminary at Fort Wayne, Ind., and the author of over 25 books on the topics of Christianity and culture, literature, the arts, classical education, vocation, and theology.*

The Qur'an and rehal

# Is Democracy More Precious than Liberty?

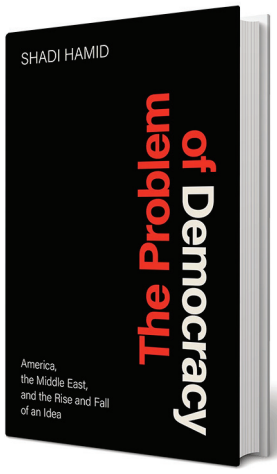
**What does majority rule mean without securing individual human rights and freedoms? One Muslim intellectual looks to the past for a better Islamic future. But the past is not what he thinks.**

by **MUSTAFA AKYOL**

**SHADI HAMID, A LONGTIME** senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy, is one of the most prominent Muslim public intellectuals in America. His writings on Islam and politics, especially in relation to American foreign policy, include important insights, with which I have often agreed. His latest book, *The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea*, is a bit different, however. As well argued and thought-provoking as it is, I nevertheless found it profoundly disagreeable.

Let me begin with what is agreeable: Hamid is highly critical of the decades-old American foreign policy in the Middle East, which has often supported regional dictators for the sake of narrowly defined national interests and "stability." A private joke made by Barack Obama, which Hamid quotes, sums it up well: "All I need in the Middle East is a few smart autocrats." This is quite an unwise strategy, as others have also criticized. Just recently, writing for the Cato Institute, Jon Hoffman rightly noted that the autocrats in question only "reinforce many of the region's most important problems, tensions, and grievances."

However, these autocrats (at least the pro-Western ones) often use an argument that makes some sense




*The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea*

By Shadi Hamid

(Oxford University Press, 2022)

to Western audiences: if they lose power, Islamists will replace them, and they will be worse. The archetypal dilemma here is to be found in Egypt, Hamid's country of origin, which looms large in his narrative, where free elections in 2012 brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, only to be followed by a brutal military coup in 2013. Those who were worried that the Muslim Brotherhood would ultimately impose Sharia, or Islamic law, and build its own party-state either supported the coup or at least tolerated it. Consequently, a non-Islamist dictatorship, the model that had ruled Egypt since 1954, was restored.

This is the vicious cycle in the Middle East—secular-leaning autocrats versus popular Islamists—that many good-willed people want to break. I myself have written about it, seeking the solution in "nurturing *liberal* democracy in Muslim- majority societies, in which both secular and Islamic forces can coexist without either of them becoming hegemonic and intolerant of the other." But Hamid has a different suggestion: Let the Islamists come to power with elections, rule as they wish, and feel free to get rid of the "liberal" side of liberal democracy.

That is why much of Hamid's book is a long diatribe against liberalism. But beware: What he means here is not the left-wing progressivism that the term "liberal" implies in American politics today. Instead, he means the classical liberalism that many American conservatives have traditionally cherished. It is the very foundational American idea that every human being bears inalienable rights, which Hamid all-too-neatly distinguishes from democracy:

> The classical liberal tradition, emerging out of the Enlightenment after Europe exhausted itself with wars of belief, prioritizes non-negotiable personal freedoms and individual autonomy, eloquently captured in documents like the Bill of Rights. Meanwhile, democracy, while requiring some minimal protection of rights to allow for fair and meaningful competition, is more concerned with popular sovereignty, popular will, and responsiveness to the voting public.

After clarifying this distinction, Hamid throws his lot in with "democracy." He also calls all policymakers to "privilege democracy, with its emphasis on the preferences of majorities or pluralities through regular elections and the rotation of power, over liberalism, which prioritizes individual freedoms, personal autonomy, and social progressivism."

Hamid's reference here to "social progressivism" may conflict with what I just wrote above: By "liberalism," he means classical liberalism, which is in fact distinct from "social progressivism." (It could even go against it.) Yet throughout his book, Hamid often conflates the two, making his "liberalism" a bit too vague.

But perhaps there is a good reason for that: As Hamid has put it elsewhere, he agrees with America's "post-liberals, including the national conservatives," that it is inherent in classical liberalism ultimately to "discard traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality and [turn] aside the views of anyone who objects." In other words, he agrees with neo-integralist scholars such as Patrick Deneen who argue that American classical liberalism is intrinsically hostile to Christianity—and, of course, Islam, too.

## INESCAPABLE UNIVERSAL RIGHTS

Theoretically, the most interesting—and to me the most unacceptable—part of Hamid's argument is his dismissal of the very concept of universal rights. "Rights are not," he asserts, "freestanding, self-evident, or morally transcendent." Therefore, rights cannot be held above any democracy. Instead, "rights would be derived from the democracy." This inevitably means that majorities should rule as they wish, without being constrained by "individual freedoms and minority rights." A classical liberal, however, would insist that there are, in fact, universal rights, which are rooted in natural law. But Hamid seems uninterested in that argument. The term "natural law" does not even appear in the book.

There is a key flaw in Hamid's argument against

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, president of Turkey

universality, however: It cuts down the branch on which he is sitting. For if there are no universal rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, why should there be an absolute right to vote? If his dismissal of liberalism is valid—that it is a subjective Western system that other civilizations don't need—why is the same dismissal not valid for democracy as well? In fact, that is exactly what pro-regime ideologues in Beijing and Moscow, and pro-ruler clerics in Riyadh and Dubai, argue.

Hamid seems to push this theoretical argument mainly to substantiate the legitimacy of democratically elected Islamists in the Middle East. I can see how it will be music to the ears of those Islamists, as well as many conservative Muslims who may be uninterested in the rights of secular individuals or non-Muslims in their midst, let alone the rights of those branded as "heretics" or "apostates."

But these Muslims deserve to be cautioned: Hamid's argument cuts both ways. In other words, it also means that in contexts where Muslims are minorities, their rights can be curbed as well, this time by non-Muslim majorities. I confirmed this with Hamid on a lively panel about his book sponsored by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy. I asked him whether, in his worldview, it is legitimate for French secularists to ban Islamic veils of Muslim women or for India's Hindu supremacists to punish Muslims for eating beef? His answer was that he would not favor such bans, but, yes, it would be legitimate.

## HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

How far could such illiberal democracies go? In much of his book, Hamid focuses on the Middle East, especially the ambitions of Islamists, arguing that they

"IF THERE ARE NO UNIVERSAL RIGHTS, SUCH AS FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND RELIGION, WHY SHOULD THERE BE AN ABSOLUTE RIGHT TO VOTE?"

can't, in fact, go too far. Yes, Islamist parties ultimately want *tatbiq al-shariah*, or "the application of Sharia," he writes, but "they have struggled to define what it is exactly that they want." When they come to power, there will be some "Islamization," he admits, like alcohol bans or limitations on women's sporting events, but all that is tolerable, as even non-Islamists in the Arab world are socially conservative. One wonders about more burning issues such as capital punishment for "apostasy" and "blasphemy," but the book offers no answers.

In fact, there is a country where we can see how "application of Sharia" and "Islamization" has taken place in the context of an electoral democracy: Pakistan, which gets praised by Hamid, along with Malaysia, for being, despite "flaws," "considerably more democratic than their Arab counterparts." That is all that we hear about Pakistan. Any observer of this Islamic Republic, however, could see how its "Islamization," which took place in the 1970s and '80s under a military regime but also with "popular demand," led to horrific results for women as well as religious minorities such as Ahmadis, Shiites, and Christians. Speaking out of that experience, Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani cautions us that, for mainstream Islamists, democracy is just a tool to come to power and what they "actually seek is a dictatorship of the pious."

There is another country relevant to this discussion—my native Turkey, which Hamid discusses. He says that, in the past two decades, under the

> **WITHOUT LIBERTY, DEMOCRACY EASILY COLLAPSES INTO THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY.**

democratically elected president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AK Party—Islamists by Turkish standards—Turkey has seen only a "soft Islamization." That is true, but speaking out of my experience, there is something Hamid overlooks: Turkey's ruling Islamists don't want to "Islamize" their secular compatriots: They just want to make them—along with the "traitors" from their own ranks—suffer. They also want to "conquer" everything that the seculars used to own—from media, universities, and businesses to the entire state itself, down to even the neighborhoods. It is another exercise in "the dictatorship of the pious," whose endgame remains to be seen.

Granted, one can say that Turkey's seculars have not been too humane either, which is true also for most non-Islamist forces in the Arab world. And that is the fundamental problem: The region is tormented by endless conflicts between vicious tribes—political, religious, and ethnic. In a passage with which I agree, Hamid notes this fact:

> In this book, there is no "resolution" to the problem of religion and politics. The problem of deep difference over the role of Islam will remain, with neither side able to conclusively defeat the other. There will be Islamists and there will be secularists, with many shades in between.

## SHRINK THE STATE

I can offer a resolution to this problem: Minimize the state and maximize the freedom. Minimize the state so there are fewer public resources for these irreconcilable tribes to fight over. Maximize the freedom so the Islamists can live by their Sharia but not impose it as the law of the land, while others live as they choose. (Similar to Israel's accommodation of all sorts of Jews, from the ultra-Orthodox, who live by their Halakha, to the atheists.) Also, boost free market capitalism so that economic rationality thaws strict communal boundaries and empowers individuals. In other words, support both political and economic liberalism.

Hamid could argue that this is perhaps a nice liberal dream but not realistic. Liberalism, he says, "can't but clash with Islam." Islamic reformers can try to change things, but they have little chance: "This is not Islam as it 'should' be, but Islam as it has been—nearly uninterrupted for the better part of fourteen centuries."

Yet this argument, too, has an ironic blind spot: for some 13 centuries, "Islam as it has been" did not include democracy, Hamid's favorite political system, either. Medieval Islamic political doctrine never advocated free elections, political parties, parliaments, and term limits. Such ideas appeared in the Islamic civilization only in the 19th century, with Western influence, and thanks to thinkers such as the New Ottomans. They are often called "Islamic liberals," as they advocated not just political representation but all the key features of political and economic liberalism as well, finding inspiration from the Qur'an and the Prophet's example. (I myself am an admirer of such pioneers in this regard as Namik Kemal and Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, as I highlighted them in my book *Why, as a Muslim, I Defend Liberty*.

So if Muslims had stuck simply to "Islam as it has been" and never advocated new ideas, democracy would also not have occurred to them. Similarly, "Islam as it has been" included slavery until the 19th or even 20th century—when it was abolished thanks to international human rights campaigns from outside, as well as efforts of Islamic and secular liberals from within.

That convinces me that "Islam as it has been" can change even more—toward liberty. And I find that absolutely necessary, for without liberty, democracy easily collapses into the tyranny of the majority. But I also believe that the people of the Middle East, and people elsewhere from East to West, deserve better than that. They deserve the dignity of liberty. RL

***Mustafa Akyol** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute focusing on Islam and modernity and also an affiliate scholar at the Acton Institute.*

King's College Chapel at the University of Cambridge

# Boutique Marxism and the Critical Revolution

**A Marxist critic sets out to reintroduce readers to five men who radically changed the way we approach literature. The result is both more conservative and confusing than radical.**

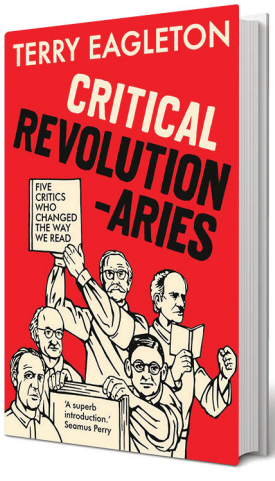
by **R. V. YOUNG**

**THE TITLE OF** this review may well seem unduly snide; regrettably, it is the most precise description of the account of critical history on offer in this book. From his earliest publications until now, Terry Eagleton has sought to shape a version of Marxist critical discourse thoroughly purged of such disagreeable features of actual Marxist regimes as the imposition of "social realism," the intimidation of brilliant artists (Shostakovich, for instance), show trials, the gulag, five-year plans resulting in mass starvation, the totalitarian oppression of entire populations, and so on. Instead, Eagleton offers niche political and cultural products tailored to the tastes of a clientele invited to ignore Stalin and Mao, while feeling superior to T.S. Eliot: "For most moderately enlightened readers today, Eliot's social views range from the objectionable to the obnoxious." It is difficult not to concede a grudging admiration to the Marxist intellectuals who have brought the trick off; no one has ever taken seriously a distinction between "vulgar" fascism or Nazism and a more sophisticated genial brand.

This feature of Eagleton's work would be merely annoying if it did not thoroughly distort his vision of literature and literary criticism and undermine his thesis that the five very diverse figures dealt with

in this book brought off a critical revolution that "changed the way we read." For Eagleton is a learned and engaging writer who clearly cares about literature and wishes to preserve the reputation and influence of men who helped him understand and value it; but his commitment to Marxist revolution, even if it "is not of the kind which leaves the streets running with blood," is destructive of every cultural institution, such as literature, that is not subservient to the ideological goals of the revolutionaries. There is no way to reconcile the existence of works of literature (or any art) possessed of their own intrinsic integrity of meaning and form with a political program that subjects everything to its immediate goals.

Eagleton expounds the work of five critics: T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams. Except for Eliot, all of them taught at Cambridge, where Eagleton was a student, with Williams as his tutor. The argument for Eliot's importance at Cambridge is not persuasive, but he could hardly be left out of any discussion of the "critical revolution" of the 20th century: By any measure, he was the most important influence on modernist literature in the English-speaking world. In any case, Eagleton's purpose is surprisingly conservative for a Marxist revolutionary. "The underlying conviction of this book," he writes, "is that a vital tradition of literary criticism is in danger of being neglected." The five critics he discusses are, he continues, "among the most original and influential of modern times." Eagleton does not say so in so many words, but he seems to be worried lest these five critics, who obviously were important to his own understanding of the meaning and purpose of literature, be forgotten, if not "canceled" outright, as dead white males encumbered with the wrong kind of political baggage. I suspect that the designation "revolutionary," which fits only Raymond Williams well and is especially odd applied to Eliot and Leavis, is a tactical move to establish the continued relevance of problematic critics from the misty bygone days of the early 20th century.




*Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read*

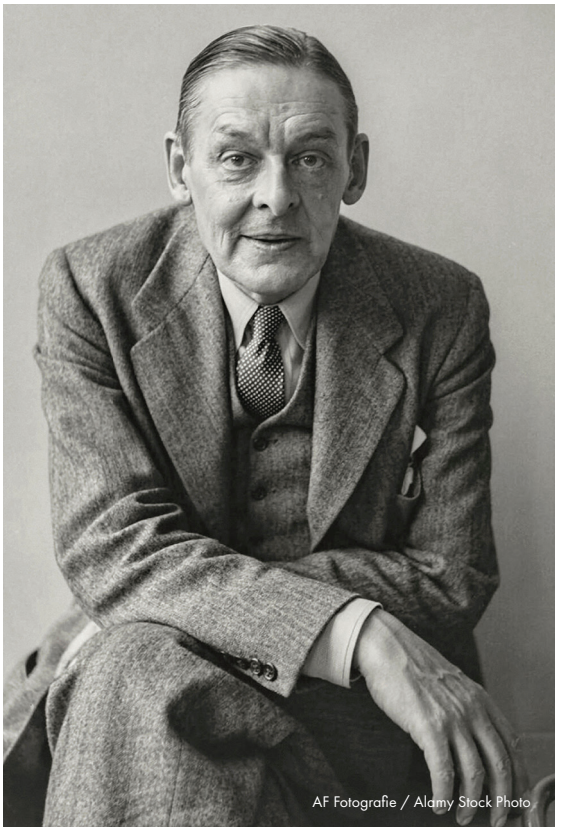
By Terry Eagleton

(Yale University Press, 2022)

> "THERE IS NO WAY TO RECONCILE THE EXISTENCE OF WORKS OF LITERATURE POSSESSED OF THEIR OWN INTRINSIC INTEGRITY OF MEANING AND FORM WITH A POLITICAL PROGRAM THAT SUBJECTS EVERYTHING TO ITS IMMEDIATE GOALS."

## ELIOT AND ARISTOTLE

The most important piece of criticism produced among the five critics is Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which is essentially compatible with the *Poetics* of Aristotle and, therefore, a work not of revolution but rather reaction or restoration. In insisting that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality," Eliot repudiates Romanticism's placement of the artist's self-expression at the center of poetry and, indeed, of all the arts. Like Aristotle, Eliot is more interested in the work of art created by the poet and in the way the experience of the work can engage the reader than in the poet's personal feelings or intentions regarding the work. Similarly, Aristotle




**T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)**

does not concern himself with Homer's political views or Sophocles' sexual inclinations. He devotes most of the *Poetics* to discussions of the formal elements of tragedy (plot, characterization, style, etc.) and the effect on the audience: *catharsis*, or purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. Eliot argues along the same lines in maintaining that the "*significant* emotion…has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done."

## I. A. RICHARDS

The stark assertiveness of the essay in brusquely rejecting the vague, genteel appreciations that had become the dominant mode of literary discussion in the preceding decades undoubtedly seemed shockingly radical at the time. In the context of the history of literary criticism, however, going back to classical antiquity, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is hardly revolutionary. I.A. Richards, on the other hand, despite the superficial resemblances of his critical practice to Eliot's, presents truly radical ideas about literature. In his no-nonsense professional approach to literature, with its adherence to the close reading of particular poetic texts and dismissal of the poet's biography, Richards sounds like Eliot. "The age of the dilettante was drawing to a close," Eagleton remarks. Ironically, Eagleton fails to note that Richards himself turned into a dilettante: "[Richards]," Eagleton remarks, "was a pioneer of so-called practical criticism…but he was also a literary theorist, psychologist, philosopher of language, aesthetician, educationalist, cultural commentator and second-rate poet." He also had very little interest in literature as such. "It is important to see that Richards's notion of art is a non-cognitive one," Eagleton says. "It is not the function of poetry to yield us any kind of knowledge. It is more of a form of therapy than a mode of understanding." A thoroughgoing materialist, Richards regarded a poem as a pattern of "pseudo-statements" that if well shaped would organize the reader's emotional impulses into a more stable and psychologically healthy state. According to this theory, a sufficient advance in psychotropic pharmacology could make literature obsolete. Unsurprisingly, Richards eventually moved away from literary criticism altogether.

## WILLIAM EMPSON

William Empson is revolutionary only insofar as he opposes, in a largely personal fashion, conventional morality in general and Christian belief in particular. His substantive contribution to literary criticism consists of numerous eccentric interpretations of familiar works of English literature based on extremely close attention to the most minute details of the text. Sometimes he is quite brilliant; more often he is merely perverse. Eagleton wants him to be a hero of the left but has difficulty bringing it off. "This son of the English squirearchy," Eagleton notes, moved to the political left out of disgust with the "ostentatiously privileged" Winchester College. He reports, however, that Empson "explicitly and unfashionably endorses the so-called Whig theory of history, which sees English history as a steady expansion of liberty, prosperity and enlightenment." Worse still is this regretful observation: "As with Eliot and Leavis, though in a less doctrinaire manner, there is a wistful sense of history having lapsed from a more sound condition in the past." Empson was neither a

theorist of a radical new understanding of literature, nor even a reliable leftist, despite an admiration for the Chinese communist revolution.

## F. R. LEAVIS

Perhaps Eagleton's most difficult case is F.R. Leavis, who, like Eliot, was largely interested in reestablishing the great tradition of literature while rearranging the hierarchy of reputation and influence. Like Eliot, he insisted that a work of literature is less a vehicle of the author's self-expression than a verbal structure offering the reader insight into moral reality. Finally, he also resembles Eliot in still having a following among men who are actually interested in his work as such, rather than merely as a means of advancing an academic career by editing and promoting it. Despite Eagleton's efforts to find leftist tendencies in Leavis' criticism, current devotees of that criticism are almost all social conservatives of traditionalist predilections. Leavis was dismayed, however, by Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism and subsequently became more critical of him. For Leavis, morality was defined as whatever enhanced "Life," which he found exemplified in the novels of D.H. Lawrence. It is unnecessary to explain why this judgment is dubious for Christians like Eliot; Eagleton points out that it is also problematic today for "a good many students" who only know "that he was a racist, sexist, elitist, misogynistic, homophobic, anti-Semitic believer in 'blood hierarchies.'" These attitudes suggest the populism of a Little Englander rather than anything revolutionary by Marxist standards.

## RAYMOND WILLIAMS

Raymond Williams, both as Eagleton's tutor and as a fellow Marxist, is clearly the critic whose views are most compatible with Eagleton's own "revolutionary" approach to literature. Even so, Eagleton is not altogether satisfied with his early mentor: On the one hand, Williams' book *Culture and Society* "is altogether too indulgent to the reactionary viewpoint of most of the authors it considers (e.g., Burke, Newman, Arnold, Ruskin, Lawrence, Eliot)"; on the other, Eagleton chides Williams for a lack of literary discrimination, as when a subsequent book, *The Country and the City*, "quotes some verse by the minor nineteenth-century writer James Thomson without mentioning the most obvious about it, namely how atrocious it is." Eagleton proceeds to point out that "Williams grew steadily more hostile to literary evaluation, which he associated with the conventional criticism he wanted to abandon." But Eagleton will observe with evident admiration that Williams is "a critic, sociologist, novelist, cultural theorist and political commentator," and that he devised the new field of "cultural studies" to encompass the various aspects of his project. Like I.A. Richards, the "revolution" in criticism Williams achieved amounted essentially to abandoning literary criticism. If the former was, finally, more interested in psychology, the latter gravitated into what really amounts (as Eagleton admits) to a "sociology of literature." Williams heralded what has come to be a major force in current literary study, which is not about literature as such but rather about "'writing' (not simply the recent historical invention known as literature)…studied as a material, historical practice."

## A FAILED REVOLUTION

Terry Eagleton is thus writing at cross purposes with himself. By far the most important figure in his book, T.S. Eliot was himself a conservative Christian who sought to overthrow the most revolutionary aspects of the Romantic movement, and he remains important to his intellectual and spiritual descendants as a man who helped recover the great tradition of Christian civilization. F.R. Leavis was, in his own way, a conservative and continues to appeal to some contemporary conservatives. William Empson was an eccentric individualist who fits in no one's political or critical program and is today little heeded outside of academe. I.A. Richards and Raymond Williams, by diminishing the integrity and importance of literature as such, pointed the way to the "woke" revolution currently in progress. While Romanticism placed the emphasis on the genius and vision of the creative artist, the current regime considers only the political, sexual, and racial bona fides of artists of every kind. It threatens to erase altogether the unique artistic achievement of Western civilization. Eagleton, I suspect, realizes this and fears it; hence his incoherent effort to convince us that these five men are the true and abiding "critical revolutionaries." RL

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


# Abortion: Violence Against Women

**The history of abortion in America started not in the 20th century but virtually at the nation's advent. It's a gruesome tale that many have tried to sanitize through deflection and misrepresentation. It's time the whole story was told.**

by **ALEXANDRA DESANCTIS**

**ABORTION SOLVES PROBLEMS**. This is what its advocates promised in the years leading up to the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which invented a supposed constitutional right to abortion. This is what its advocates continue to argue today in the wake of the Court's 2022 decision reversing *Roe*. Abortion is a solution.

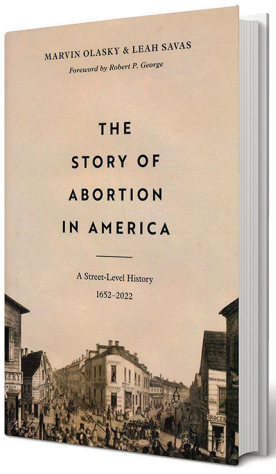
Rarely do you encounter a supporter of legal abortion who sings its praises as an act of killing. Indeed, it can be hard to locate an abortion advocate willing to admit, let alone celebrate, the reality that every abortion procedure ends the life of a human being in his or her mother's womb. Instead, the argument for abortion centers on women: Women need abortion. Without it, women will always struggle to flourish and stand on an equal footing with men.

This mentality is so prominent among abortion's defenders that it has even appeared in Supreme Court opinions, including most notably the majority opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which in 1992 cemented the *Roe* ruling. Legal arguments for abortion tend to focus heavily on the claim that women will always find their rights and opportunities limited in a country that fails to legalize abortion, at any time, for any reason. Advocates view abortion restrictions, no matter what form they may take, as restrictions on the potential and personhood of American women.

In their new book, *The Story of Abortion in America*, Marvin Olasky and Leah Savas paint a far more complicated picture, tracing a street-level history of how abortion has actually taken place in our country and how it continues to take place today. The

authors share a pro-life worldview, but the book isn't an anti-abortion polemic. If readers draw negative conclusions about abortion after reading the stories the book contains, it won't be because the authors indulge in propagandistic tactics.

Indeed, they've taken pains to craft a fact-based and rigorously documented assessment of the practice of abortion throughout U.S. history. Their book is likely to convince readers that abortion isn't a real solution to anything, not because of didactic argumentation, but because its stories reveal that abortion, on the ground, is far more distressing and harmful than its advocates would have us believe.




*The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History (1652–2022)*
By Marvin Olasky and Leah Savas
(Crossway, 2023)

## DESPAIR AND DESTITUTION

The book tracks history from 1652 to the present day, which means that much of its content covers the pre-*Roe* landscape, when illegal abortion was most often used to keep disadvantaged women sexually available while relieving fathers of responsibility. It's also a particularly murky time period when it comes to modern knowledge of abortion. The book is, for this reason alone, a remarkable service.

Olasky and Savas detail how, for centuries, abortion was an act of desperation, not an empowering choice by women seeking greater freedom. In most cases, abortion involved derelict abortionists profiting from performing dangerous procedures on women, particularly the most needy and destitute. In colonial America, abortion "was always dangerous," with ingested abortifacients being something akin to "playing Russian roulette," while primitive surgical abortion "was the equivalent of two bullets in the cylinder." These odds didn't stop women from pursuing abortion, but it wasn't because it promised liberation: "Only utter desperation, or unrelenting pressure from a lover, would lead a woman to accept a one-third possibility of death."

Abortion in this era, as in most of its history in the U.S., functioned as a mode of cover-up for adultery or premarital sex, heaping the responsibility for any misdeeds entirely on the shoulders of the pregnant woman. In 1742, one such young woman named Sarah Grosvenor died after first ingesting an abortifacient then undergoing abortive surgery at the hands of Dr. John Hallowell. Grosvenor was unmarried and pursued abortion after the child's father, Amasa Sessions, promised to marry her but reneged after discovering she was pregnant. Olasky and Savas write that, in fact, it was Sessions who sought the assistance from Hallowell that left both mother and child dead.

Another chapter describes the 1838 tragedy of 21-year-old Eliza Sowers, who became pregnant as a result of an adulterous affair with William Nixon, superintendent of the paper mill where she worked. After attempting several dangerous and ineffective self-abortion methods, apparently assisted by Nixon, Sowers was passed off to a Dr. Henry Chauncey, who spent 10 days trying increasingly gruesome methods to abort Sowers' baby, at the end of which Sowers died.

Far from allowing women the option to "terminate pregnancy"—the primary language surrounding abortion in modern times—abortion in early America often led to severe injury and even death for the mother, in addition to killing the unborn child. What emerges from these and other anecdotes is a picture of abortion not as a remarkable invention to enable female freedom and equality but rather as a tool of oppression, propping up a social system that took advantage of women.

## LEGAL THEREFORE SAFE?

Yet might we draw from some of these stories the conclusion, advanced throatily by proponents of abortion, that the opposite of "unsafe" abortion is legal abortion, obtained at will without state oversight or regulation? One of the chief pro-abortion arguments in the debate leading up to *Roe* was that legalization would put an end to so-called back-alley abortions, which often led to maternal harm.

*The Story of Abortion in America* exposes the falsehoods in this narrative. In one later chapter, the authors explore the maternal-mortality argument

> **THE AUTHORS SHARE A PRO-LIFE WORLDVIEW, BUT THE BOOK ISN'T AN ANTI-ABORTION POLEMIC.**

explicitly, poking holes in the data that abortion supporters present to make their case for "safe" abortion and explaining why it's unrealistic to claim that huge numbers of women will die in the presence of pro-life laws. Both before and after abortion was legalized, abortionists left a bloody trail through American history, taking the lives not only of countless millions of unborn children but also of countless pregnant mothers. The modern decline in maternal deaths due to abortion has far less to do with changes wrought by *Roe* than it does with the advent of medical technologies such as antiseptics and antibiotics. Even so, there is plenty of evidence that abortionists have continued to physically harm pregnant mothers, including during the nearly five decades during which abortion was legal across the nation.

For example, Olasky and Savas tell the story of Leslie Wolbert, who in 2005 sought help from Planned Parenthood after discovering she was unexpectedly pregnant. She refused a surgical abortion, saying she believed such procedures murder the unborn baby, so she was given chemical-abortion drugs, which she believed functioned like the morning-after pill. She describes viewing the pill, at the time, as "a thing that isn't an abortion." Wolbert took the first pill and went home, where she completed the abortion in her bathroom after a great deal of physical suffering, which ended with her having to flush her unborn child down the toilet.

"Unlike many stories of chemical abortions from colonial days," the authors write, "Wolbert's abortion story ended with one death instead of two.…But no amount of specialization could spare Wolbert from the emotional and mental turmoil she experienced during and after the abortion." They go on to chronicle how, though fewer women die as a result of chemical abortions today, these drugs still pose a risk to maternal health. Instead of attempting to protect women from possible harm, the abortion industry has blocked every effort to track adverse events or create new safety regulations—and, indeed, has fought to loosen such safety protocols where they exist.

The history that Olasky and Savas present stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric that recent waves of pro-abortion advocates have adopted, best summarized by the tagline "Shout Your Abortion," which the authors address near the book's end. It began as a social media hashtag for abortion-rights activists,

**October 2021 Women's March in Washington, D.C.**

> **ALL TOO OFTEN OUR DISPUTES ABOUT THE MORALITY AND LEGALITY OF ABORTION FEATURE NAME-CALLING AND FACT-FREE EMOTIONALISM.**

meant to draw attention to the reality that a significant number of American women have had at least one abortion.

Amelia Bonow was one of the women to pioneer this slogan on social media, and she has since become one of the figureheads of an official pro-abortion nonprofit and LLC of the same name. In a 2015 interview, Bonow contended that her project wasn't an effort to cheer abortion. "A shout is not a celebration or a value judgment; it's the opposite of a whisper, of silence," she said. "Even women who support abortion rights have been silent, and told they were supposed to feel bad about having an abortion."

But there's little question that the phrase stands for more than mere recognition of the fact that women have abortions. Among its most devoted and vocal supporters, "Shout Your Abortion" has become something of a rallying cry, a signal of an unapologetic disposition rather than an effort to share a story. It's aimed at "normalization," or breaking the supposed stigma surrounding abortion. It asserts that, if society would just relax, abortion wouldn't be such a big deal—we might even come to affirm it as a *good* thing.

The progressive rhetoric surrounding abortion has mirrored this evolution. Ten years ago, even Democratic politicians who advocated legal abortion as a policy matter would describe their support with the squishy phrase "safe, legal, and rare." Today such language has fallen out of favor on the left, replaced by a "shout your abortion" mentality. Politicians who have uttered the "safe, legal, and rare" equivocation have found themselves on the receiving end of intense condemnation from their own faction's most pro-abortion wing.

## A TIMELY TOME

It is in this context that *The Story of Abortion* in America ultimately proves most valuable. It is a book of history perfectly designed for this historical moment. Less than a year out from the Court decision undoing *Roe*, it has become increasingly clear that our national debate about abortion remains as unsettled as ever. All too often our disputes about the morality and legality of abortion feature name-calling and fact-free emotionalism. But if we are to decide whether we as a people want our country's laws and culture to continue embracing abortion as a supposed solution to social problems, we ought to consider its grotesque history and the actual practice today.

This book and its careful documentation of irrefutable facts is a powerful antidote to the poisonous lies that have infiltrated the abortion debate. Abortion supporters insist that legal abortion is always safe for women, as long as the government stays out of the way; that there is no child in the mother's womb, only a clump of cells or a parasite; that abortion frees women from convention and renders them equal to men; that abortionists are compassionate caregivers seeking to serve women in need; that abortion is, at all times and all places, a solution.

*The Story of Abortion in America* punctures each of these falsehoods in turn, demonstrating that abortion is never pain-free for women. It is never an easy choice, never a real victory. This book illustrates that countless women who have chosen abortion did so because they feared it was their only option. Far from making the case for abortion, this reality demonstrates precisely what is so problematic about it. This book illustrates how grievously abortion has harmed women, to be sure. But more than that, it exposes the deep poverty of a society that would tell women their freedom, equality, and flourishing depend on an act of violence against their own children and their own bodies. RL

***Alexandra DeSanctis** is a fellow in the Life & Family Initiative of the Ethics & Public Policy Center and co-author, with Ryan T. Anderson, of* Tearing Us Apart: How Abortion Harms Everything and Solves Nothing.

# Christ Our Composer

**The debate over the relation of God to his creation, of the divine to the human, rages on. But one seventh-century saint may offer a way out of the theological impasse, with a little help from Handel . . . and Bon Jovi.**

by **DYLAN PAHMAN**

**AMONG THE MANY WONDERS** of user-created content on the internet, a person of angelic patience, able to separate the wheat from the chaff, can acquire an amateur education in most anything. Recently, I've been delving into music theory. I'm no musicologist, but I play a little piano and guitar, and I wanted to expand my understanding for creative purposes. The more I understand, the more I can do with my own music.

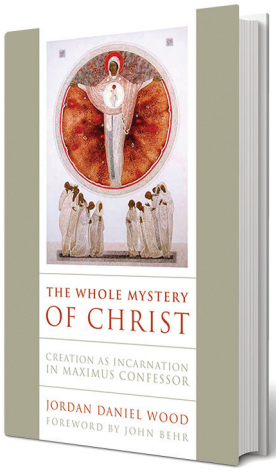
I've discovered at least three kinds of song analysis videos on YouTube: The first is the "reaction" video, where a person records his first listen to a popular song. These tend to be primarily emotional, but watching someone hear a song I know and love for the first time can bring a freshness to it. In the second type, some creators add an intellectual layer by commenting on the lyrics or instrumentation. In this genre, to give an example, I find that fans of hip-hop, in which the words are front and center, tend to offer exceptional insight into folk and rock lyrics, sometimes for songs I've heard a hundred times. The third kind of song analysis comes from expert music theorists and producers, for whom the songs are not new at all. Instead, they offer a breakdown of songs track by track, isolating drums, bass, guitar, and vocals, analyzing chord progressions, key changes, and time signatures.

Thus, if you want to try this at home, consider "Livin' on a Prayer" by Bon Jovi. You can find videos of people simply experiencing this song for the first time and offering their raw reactions. Other videos periodically stop to offer commentary on the lyrics

or the feel of the song. Lastly, you might find a video or two that breaks down the true artistry of this '80s rock anthem, pointing out subtle background instrumentation or analyzing how the song's famous key change actually jumps a minor third, and that the transition preceding it drops a beat with a single bar of 3/4 time. Instead of just listening to a song that resonates with you, you can increase your appreciation by listening as others share their experience and expertise.

This may seem unique to the 21st century, but as the Scripture teaches, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). Sure, song analysis videos didn't exist in the seventh century, but theological commentaries by this time had cemented their place in cultural creation, with the highest possible stakes. In *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor*, Jordan Daniel Wood, adjunct professor of theology at Saint Louis University, offers his analysis of the Byzantine saint, theologian, and martyr Maximus the Confessor. Tortured and rejected in his own time, Maximus would not be vindicated (though not in name) until the Sixth Ecumenical Council, and become the focus of philosophical retrieval only in the past few decades. Much of Maximus' writing, including the passage that is key to Wood's thesis, comes from his commentary on difficult passages in the homilies of the fourth-century patriarch of Constantinople, St. Gregory the Theologian. And Gregory's homilies, in turn, consist

12-inch single version of "Livin' on a Prayer" by Bon Jovi, 1986


*The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor*

By Jordan Daniel Wood

(Notre Dame Press, 2022)

of his reflections on the Gospel through scriptural commentary, dogmatic disputes, or liturgical feast days. So, to recap: Wood's book is a commentary on a commentary on a commentary on the Gospel. And this review (as if that weren't complicated enough) is like an analysis video of the second or third type above. It's a first reaction to *The Whole Mystery of Christ* but from someone with some relevant knowledge and expertise.

Now, readers could be forgiven for asking, "Why would anyone need that?" But I've already made that case. Just as I've learned so much from commentators today about my favorite songs, so also if you love the Gospel, the promise of a book like this is that through reading it you might love Jesus Christ even more, in ways you couldn't before have imagined.

Wood, for example, teases out profound implications from a single sentence of Maximus: "The Word of God, very God, wills that the mystery of his incarnation be actualized always and in all things." Whether other scholars will fully subscribe to Wood's tightly reasoned argument, that the logic of creation and Christ's incarnation is the same, nothing can detract from the intellectual achievement of this book, grappling with a difficult and ancient text and spanning the entire range of metaphysics (philosophical reflection on the nature of reality) and soteriology (theological study of the nature of salvation). It has, at least, helped me better grasp Maximus' insights into the mystery of Christ. Saint Louis University would be wise to offer this adjunct professor a permanent position before another institution swoops in and steals him away.

## PARSING THE WORD

In order to understand Wood's claim about Maximus' theology, I here offer a brief layperson's review of some important theological concepts. Hopefully nothing will be lost in translation, but one always risks doing that when trying to communicate academic work into everyday idioms. Not to worry, though. All I need to do is explain the Trinity and Incarnation. Easy, right?

The big controversy in the fourth century, Gregory the Theologian's day, was how to relate the one to the many in the Holy Trinity. The solution goes something like this: *What* is the Holy Trinity? God. *Who* is the Holy Trinity? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The "what" is *nature, essence*, or *substance*. The "who" is *person* or *subsistence*.

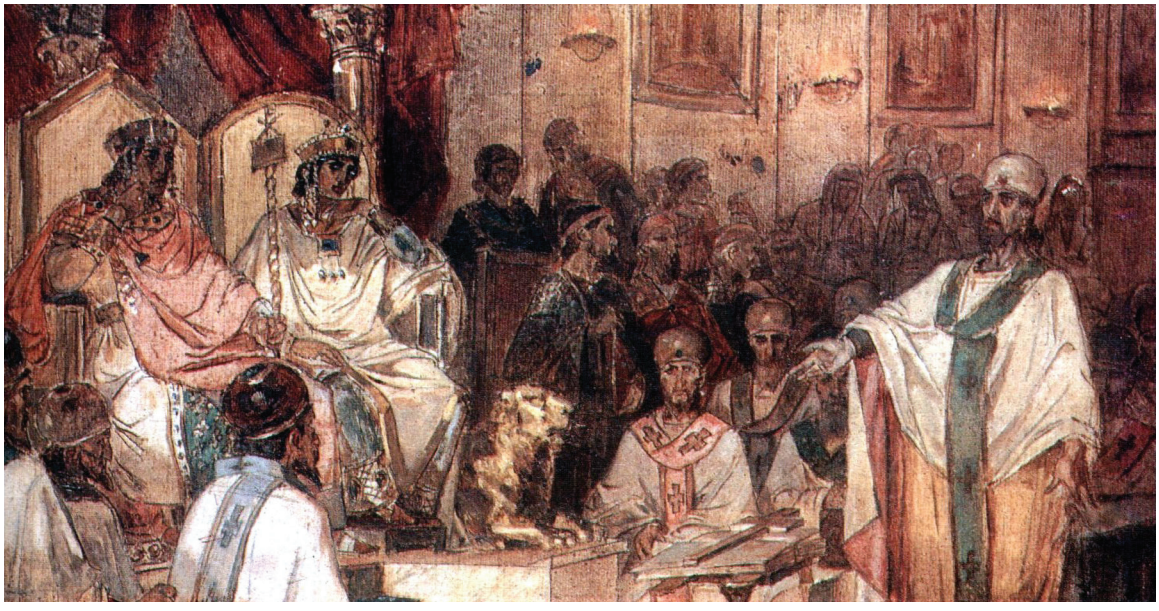
The church fathers apply this to all persons and natures. Thus, one of their most common examples is Peter, James, and John. They aren't the Holy Trinity. They are separated by time and physical distance and may act in conflict or discord. But they are a human trinity. How many natures do they have? One. How many persons are they? Three.

This differs from pagan polytheism in which gods like Zeus, Artemis, Apollo, and Poseidon only have *similar* natures. This differs from Jewish monotheism, wherein "God" refers to both nature *and* person, and thus the number of each is one. Rather, Christians are Trinitarian monotheists, believing in one God but three divine Persons who always will and act as one.

Next: the Incarnation. Just as the Council of Constantinople in 381 resolved the disputes over the Trinity, conflict continued over the mystery of Christ as both God and human. Again, it is a problem of the one and the many. Christ's divinity doesn't swallow up his humanity, nor does the divine Word simply accompany a man named Jesus. Rather, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). In this case, the "what" has two answers: fully God and fully human. The "who" has just one answer: the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 offered the definitive formulation of the nature of this reality: Jesus Christ is both God and human "in two natures," united in one person "unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, [and] inseparably." While it took centuries to work out the details—even into the seventh century and Maximus' work—the most perfect summary comes, again, from Gregory the Theologian: "That which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved," or literally "deified."


Maximus the Confessor

> **"NOTHING CAN DETRACT FROM THE INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THIS BOOK, GRAPPLING WITH A DIFFICULT AND ANCIENT TEXT AND SPANNING THE ENTIRE RANGE OF METAPHYSICS AND SOTERIOLOGY."**



***Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon* (1876) by Vasily Surikov**

So, in the Word of God, God himself, utterly unlike creation—immaterial, immutable, impassible, and so on—became part of creation, the man Jesus Christ. Wood points out that for Maximus it is precisely the radical dissimilarity between Creator and creation that makes this possible: the Incarnation of the Word takes nothing away from his divinity while entirely preserving the fullness of humanity, since created and uncreated nature share nothing in common that could come into conflict with one another. At the same time, the only way this union could come about "unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, [and] inseparably" is if the locus of union is the Person of Jesus Christ—a concrete "who," not an abstract "what." If readers can begin to grasp that, they can start to see some insights Wood's work offers us today.

## GOD'S SYMPHONY

One of the many controversies in Maximus' day had to do with the nature of creation. Origen of Alexandria, the third-century church father, gave the Church a large amount of its theological vocabulary. Thus, we all owe him a debt. Unfortunately, so does nearly every heretic after his time as well. Origen borrowed a bit too much from the Platonism and Gnosticism of his day and theorized that souls originally emanated from God but became dissatisfied with him, and that God only created the material world as a sort of safety net to catch them in their metaphysical fall. Ultimately, they would once again be subsumed into God at the end of all things. Origen's influence became such a big problem that the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 posthumously excommunicated him and his controversial teachings.

Thus, when Maximus writes, "The Word of God, very God, wills that the mystery of his incarnation be actualized always and in all things," he partly aims to refute Origen's heretical teachings on creation, salvation, and the end times. Maximus does this through what has become a hallmark of his thought: In God's creation of the world through the Word (*logos*), he patterned each and every element of creation after their own unique words (*logoi*), present within the Word from all eternity. God created the world through speech (Gen. 1), and "The heavens declare the glory of God.... And their words [have gone out] to the end of the world" (Ps. 19:1, 4).

Once again, music can be our metaphor. Consider George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*. Handel shares almost nothing in common with his famous oratorio; he's a man, not an arrangement of musical notes and words, nor the performance thereof. And yet, if you happen to hear a portion of it, you might ask a friend, "Is this Handel?" Why? Because while remaining utterly unlike his music in terms of "what" he is, there is nevertheless something of Handel *in* his *Messiah*, without reducing the one to the other.

***George Frideric Handel* (1727) by Balthasar Denner**

Similarly, without falling into pantheism, Maximus claims that through the words of creation, the Word of God himself is *in* all creation. Creation is God's symphony; Christ, our composer.

Moreover, the Holy Trinity created humanity "in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26), shaping our body from the earth and breathing in our spirit from heaven (Gen. 2:7). Human nature is a microcosm of all creation. To the extent that we are uniquely created in the image of God, it could not be otherwise. The many words of each element of creation are grounded in the Word of God through whom "All things were made" (John 1:3). Our vocation, according to Maximus, is to unite all divisions of nature—heaven and earth, male and female, and so on—both within us and to God.

Alas, no sooner than we were created, we—and all creation with us—fell away through sin from those words by which we were created. Thus, in the Incarnation and the Cross, says Wood, "God suffers in and with and as us because his personhood is infinite, and so he can, and his will is infinite love, so he wants to." God does what we could not so that we can do what he did. Or as St. Athanasius the Great put it: "Through the Incarnation of the Word the Mind whence all things proceed has been declared, and its Agent and Ordainer, the Word of God Himself. He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God."

**"CREATION IS GOD'S SYMPHONY; CHRIST, OUR COMPOSER."**

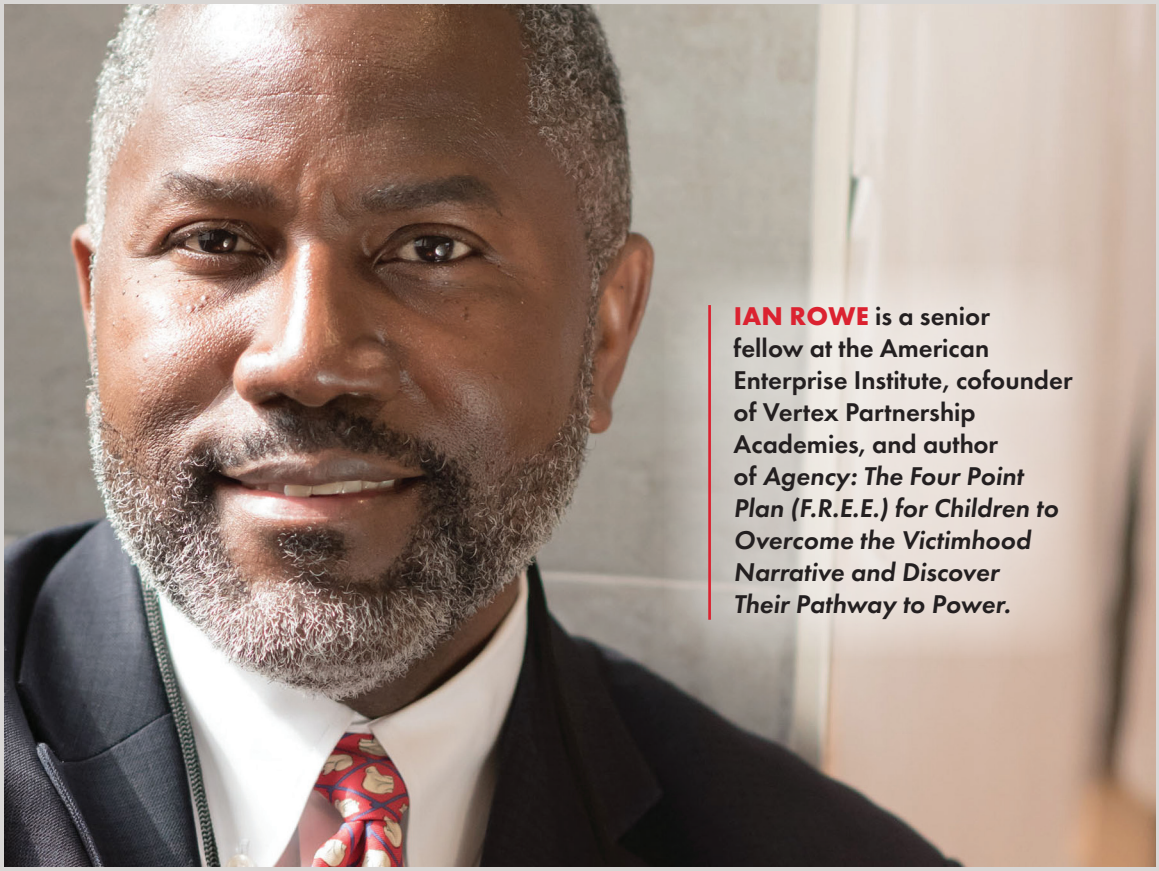
## PLAYING OUR PART

To some Christians today, that last statement might sound shocking. However, Fathers like Maximus are clear that this deification (*theosis*) happens "by grace" not nature. Thus, Wood emphasizes that our embodiment of divine life is possible only in and through the person of Jesus Christ. The Word of God grounds all creation, makes its salvation possible in his Incarnation, and through our salvation accomplishes the end of all things. Salvation, thus, consists not only of a change of status but an endless transformation of each and every person, requiring both the action of divine grace and the free cooperation of our will—for otherwise our will could not be healed. (And Lord knows we need it!)

The wide-reaching implications of this cannot be overstressed, and here I must go beyond Wood to offer some tangible examples, though I hope still in the spirit of *The Whole Mystery of Christ*. We receive divine grace through the sacraments, but we then embody that grace—which is nothing less than God himself—through virtue. We acquire virtue through asceticism, denying ourselves in all things for the sake of love, dying and rising with Christ daily.

Thus, in all our vocations, we live out humanity's one true vocation: to bring Christ, actually not metaphorically, to all the world and to unite all the world to him. From the tired parent changing a baby's diaper in the middle of the night; to the janitor cleaning yet another restroom catastrophe; to the musician practicing her instrument; to the student studying for exams; to the athlete hitting the gym; to the writer revising his submission; to businesspeople, conservationists, yes, even politicians—all of us in every aspect of our lives can and ought to embody the mystery of Christ. Even a seventh-century monk, unjustly tortured, abandoned, and forgotten in his own time. Even adjunct professors. Maybe even sinners like me. RL

***Dylan Pahman** is a research fellow at the Acton Institute, where he serves as executive editor of the* Journal of Markets & Morality.



**IAN ROWE** is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, cofounder of Vertex Partnership Academies, and author of *Agency: The Four Point Plan (F.R.E.E.) for Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power.*

## CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

# Ian Rowe

**Q** **In your video *True Diversity: Ian Rowe's Story*, you describe the resegregation of your junior high school, in which an annex was created for white students. Your parents initially wanted you to go to this new annex, but you insisted on staying at your predominantly black school, feeling that you did not have to be surrounded by white students to succeed. Your parents relented. How do you think your education, and your professional future, would have been different if your parents had gotten their way?**

I had never challenged my parents on anything, but moving schools just because of our race seemed wrong. When my parents relented, something changed in me. What I experienced then at 12 years old is what I would now describe as my first encounter with agency—the belief that I play a huge role in crafting my own destiny. Had my parents forced me to transfer to the predominantly white school, I am pretty sure I would not have developed the same level of investment and personal responsibility in my own education. I also would not have fiercely developed the idea that *any* school—regardless of its demographic or racial composition—can and must be held to the highest of expectations. It's why in

every school that I have led I have strived to ensure that there are no victims—there are only architects of their own lives.

**Q** **You have played a signal role in the start-up of charter schools in NYC and now have created Vertex Partnership Academies, which offers international baccalaureate degrees to students in the Bronx. What was the inspiration for this? What do you hope to provide for students that they might not otherwise have attained?**

For 10 years I was CEO of a network of public charter schools at the elementary and middle school level in the South Bronx. When our eighth grade students graduated, we worked hard to ensure they were placed in top private, public, and parochial high schools. But there is a structural problem: There are simply too few high-quality high school options, especially in low-income communities in the Bronx and throughout New York. So we designed the first-of-its-kind International Baccalaureate public charter high school that offers two pathways: Diploma and Careers (which will allow students in their junior and senior years to pursue apprenticeships toward earning professional credentials in particular industries). For that good deed, we were sued by the UFT teachers union! Thankfully, a New York State Supreme Court judge threw out the union's case, and we opened Vertex in August 2022 with more than 100 ninth graders. Offering a unique character-based education, Vertex is organized around the four cardinal virtues of fortitude, justice, temperance, and prudence, and dedicated to the ideals of equality of opportunity, individual dignity, and our common humanity.

**Q** **In an article for *Newsweek*, you noted that virtue signaling such as marches and new holidays is no substitute for strong family formation in the black community. Do you think government ignores the family issue as well as your strong emphasis on personal responsibility and agency because they believe it amounts to blaming the victim? If so, how do you eradicate this erroneous notion? How do you get beyond the whole victimization mindset?**

Since the death of George Floyd, there has been an explosion in completely useless, insulting, and hopelessly ineffective actions that are purportedly intended to make progress toward racial "equity." Whether it be capitalizing the "B" in *black* in newspaper stories, or placing Black Lives Matter signs on suburban lawns, or Quaker Oats pulling the Aunt Jemima brand off store shelves, none of these virtue-signaling actions actually help black people. Do you think the thousands of primarily low-income black and Hispanic students who have attended my public charter schools in the Bronx need a laminated BLM sign in someone's garden to believe that their lives have meaning and purpose, or to improve their ability to read? No! Meanwhile, critical factors like the structure and stability of the families within which children are raised matter far more to their long-term outcomes than their race. The government consistently omits, ignores, or severely downplays the impact, for example, of the staggering increase of nonmarital births that has occurred over the past five decades, particularly to women aged 24 and under. In the 1960s, more than 90% of all babies were born to married parents; now, more than 71% of babies born

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> **TOO OFTEN, IN PRACTICE, THE TRUE MEANING OF DEI IS NOT DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION, BUT RATHER DIVISION, EXCLUSION, AND INTOLERANCE.**

to women aged 24 and under are outside of marriage. Moreover, more than 30% of these young women giving birth are already struggling single mothers, now with multiple children to raise on their own. Rather than blaming the victim, we must have the courage to be honest about the dramatically increased probability of poverty, domestic violence, maleducation, and a host of societal ills that will likely befall these children and *their* children in a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

**Q** **Recent pushes for diversity and inclusion seem to have exaggerated identity politics, which often pits groups against one another. How do you instill a strong personal sense of identity in young people, and a respect for the power of self-definition, without also encouraging an "us vs. them" mentality?**

Imagine you are a 12-year-old in seventh grade and one day your teacher walks into class and announces that today's lesson is going to be a "colorism privilege walk." The teacher asks all the students to stand up and organize into one horizontal line. The teacher then starts to issue a series of conditional directives. The first one is, "If you are white, take two steps *forward*." Then, "If you are a person of color with dark skin, take two steps *back*." Then "If you're black, take three steps *back*." This is not a hypothetical situation. This is an actual class that happened in Evanston, Illinois. Unfortunately, under the misguided auspices of DEI, group-identity-focused practices like this are being replicated in classrooms and many businesses across the country. Too often, in practice, the true meaning of DEI is not Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, but rather Division, Exclusion, and Intolerance. As a growing body of research indicates, these DEI practices often perpetuate the very divisions that its advocates claim to want to eradicate. This is why I advocate for agency as an empowering alternative to the concept of Equity as defined as the absence of disparities between random identity groups, which is neither a desirable nor an achievable outcome in a free society.

**Q** **Are you seeing growing support within black intellectual circles for your work/approach to achievement and the pursuit of excellence? If so, what encouraging signs have you seen? If not, to what do you attribute the resistance?**

Thankfully, there is no monolithic black intellectual view. In running schools and writing my book *Agency*, I am aiming to amplify the voices of the millions of everyday black people and Americans of all races who are raising strong families in marriage, practicing their religious faith, exercising school choice, and living the American Dream. By highlighting the success of these real Americans—of every hue and background—I can better persuade and empower people in the most impoverished circumstances that there is a pathway to power for them too. Frankly, it really doesn't matter what a privileged black intellectual thinks, as long as a kid on 149th street and 3rd Avenue in the South Bronx knows that she has the capacity to achieve and isn't dependent on someone else to determine her fortune.

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

*The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. The magical story of a shepherd boy who embarks upon a journey has forever resonated with me. In one passage, the alchemist says to the boy who is aching in a moment of weakness: "Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams." At so many points in my life when I have made the unorthodox choice to pursue a strongly held belief, I have anchored myself in this idea.

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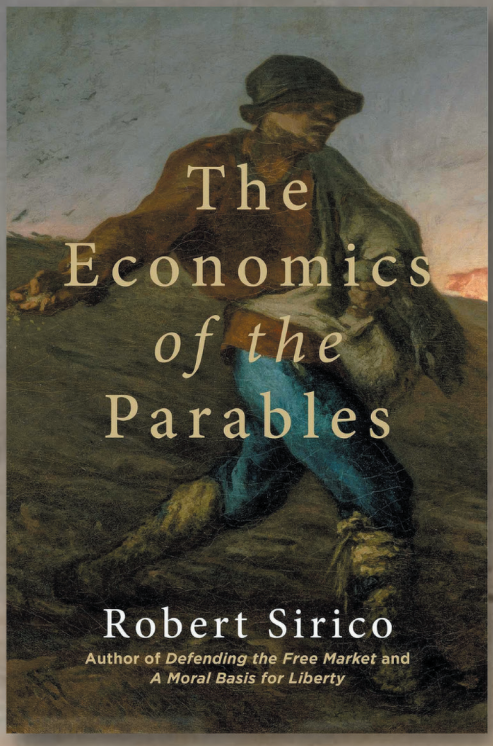


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