

Religion & Liberty

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Antigone:
A Hero for
Our Time

JONATHAN LEAF

The Black
Church: A World
Within a World

RACHEL FERGUSON

The Existential
Threat of
Anti-Christian
Nationalism

D.G. HART

PLATO'S REPUBLIC AND OUR OWN

BY JEFFREY POLET

ALSO INSIDE: WILFRED M. MCCLAY, TERRY MATTINGLY,
MIKE COSPER, ALEC RYRIE, YUVAL LEVIN, THOMAS S. KIDD,
JORDAN J. BALLOR, JAMES MATTHEW WILSON, RICHARD TURNBULL

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THE ISSUE THIS TIME

BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

*"There is a point beyond which
even justice becomes unjust."*

—Sophocles, *Electra*

*"Many seek the favor of a ruler, but it is
from the Lord that one gets justice."*

—Proverbs 29: 26

Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that the European philosophical tradition consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. No doubt he was indulging in a bit of hyperbole. But not by much. When confronted with foundational questions—such as “What is it?”—Plato is usually where we begin.

The search for the just republic is as old as hemlock cocktails and as new as the next election. Justice—what is it? You can't click a link without encountering a reference to social justice. But again, what is it? How will we know whether we have achieved it? *Is it achievable, even desirable?* How much power are we willing to cede to what authorities to enforce it? Who can fairly and faithfully negotiate competing interests? Who has such wisdom?

Our cover story examines how far our American republic has come in addressing such questions and in avoiding the traps (mostly) of Plato's republic. Spoiler alert: “Only by the *fracturing* of society itself could the security against faction be realized, and this fracturing represented moral progress over insistence on unity that either mirrored Plato's educative state that gave everyone the same opinions, or its anticipation in the progressive claim that unity could be achieved by transforming human nature,” Jeffrey Polet explains.

As if it needed saying, justice is not merely societal but also personal. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the title character seeks justice for her dead brother, who has been denied a proper burial by royal decree. But the law of God and loyalty to family supersede even the dictates of kings. Questions of conflicting claims to obedience plague us even today in our COVID-ridden age. Playwright Jonathan Leaf draws some uncomfortable parallels between the ancients and ourselves.

Injustice is often easier to spot than its opposite, and often takes both time and courage to redress. Not to mention compromise. Alec Ryrie, professor of the history of Christianity at Durham, invites us to consider the work of William Wilberforce and the evangelical Clapham Sect in fighting the ultimate injustice of the British slave trade, including the compromises made in that cause that many today would find, well, unjust.

Closer to home, if there is one institution most associated with the battle for justice, it's the Black church. From the antebellum era to 2022, the Black church has represented more than just an ecclesiastical establishment: It is a world within a world, nurturing mind, body, spirit—and entrepreneurial

ambition. It has much to teach church and unchurched alike. Rachel Ferguson has an inspiring overview.

Often counterposed to justice movements is so-called Christian nationalism, which, despite its detractors' concerns, has been around as long as our republic itself. The question *again* is—"What is it?" Before you answer, consider that, as with certain forms of COVID, you may be a carrier and not know it. Historian D.G. Hart was surprised to learn he was.

Have you ever wondered why religion coverage in the media is so...bad? You first must come to terms with the paradigm shift in journalism in general. Veteran religion-beat journalist Terry Mattingly demonstrates why as the *New York Times* goes, so goes much of American journalism. And that goes double for religion journalism.

Speaking of media, who better to read about *Celebrities for Jesus* than the man who brought us the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast, Mike Cosper? When worship mimics popular entertainment, expect the pastor to be the star, with the bling and groupies to match. But is this what the Good Book demands of the faithful shepherd? Once upon a time, Americans would have been able to quote chapter and verse on the subject. Thomas S. Kidd, research professor of church history, takes a look at the role that America's book, the Bible, has historically played in the lives of Americans, in a review of evangelical scholar Mark A. Noll's latest.

Strange to say, the Bible we know has many more pages than Thomas Jefferson's did. Why? Wilfred M. McClay, author of the award-winning *Land of Hope*, reviews Kidd's search for the religion of our third president.

That religion, it appears, was quite different from that of the church fathers, who read a different Bible, too. The Rt. Rev. Richard Turnbull shares their insights. And Anglican scholar Michael F. Bird illustrates the balancing act of religious freedom and varieties of secularism. Jordan J. Ballor clarifies.

As if this weren't enough, *National Affairs* editor Yuval Levin paints a lovely, thoughtful word portrait of historian Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Taking us home, James Matthew Wilson, award-winning scholar of philosophical theology and literature, reviews a new book of poetry by Joseph Bottum. I leave you with a sample:

The fact that all that lives must die
Unburdens us and eases small dismay.
Undoes ambition, greed, the rush of fame.
Unkindness, too: The price of living long
Is burying your parents, teachers, friends.
Be gentle. Everyone you know is dying.

Happy New Year.

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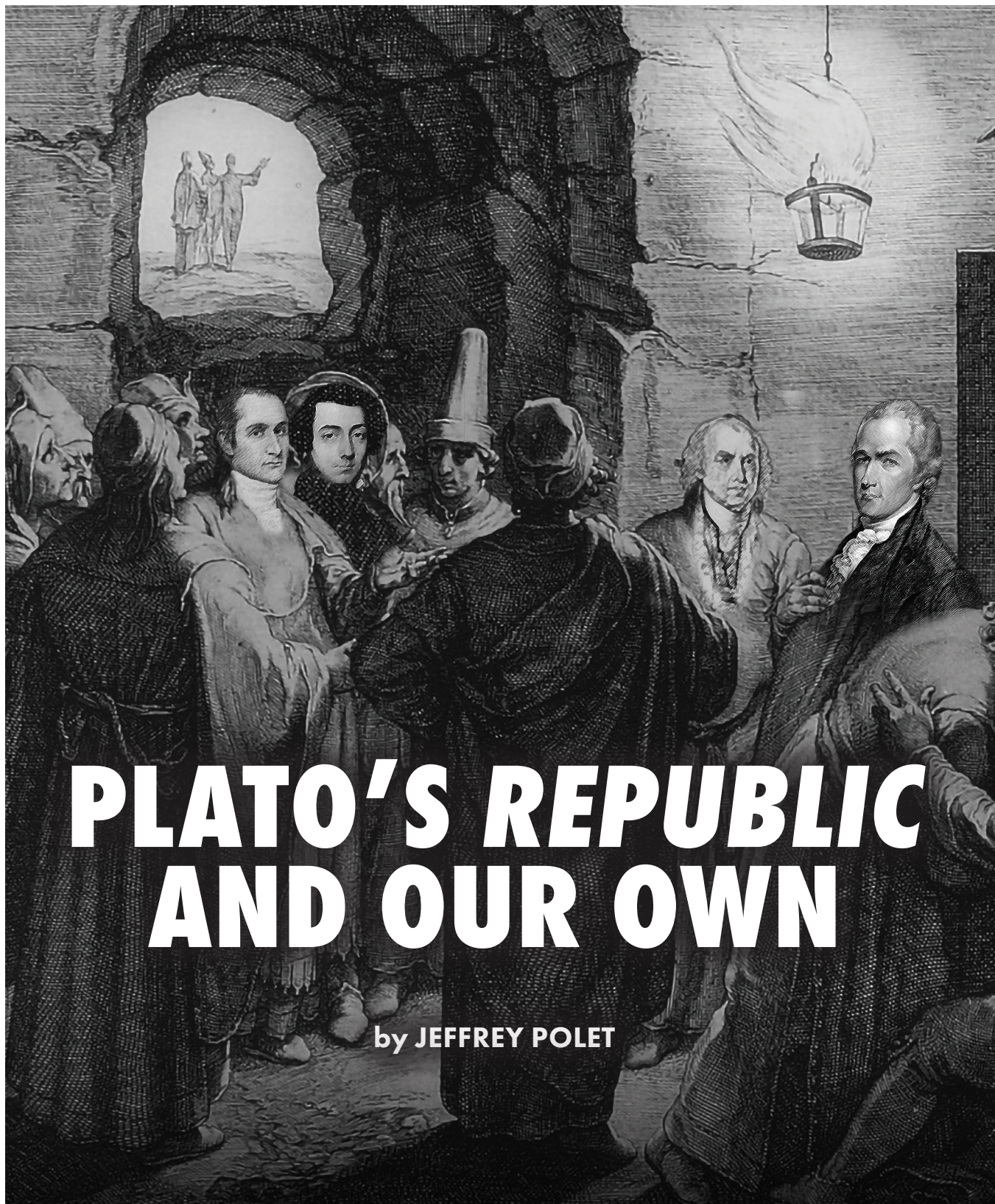
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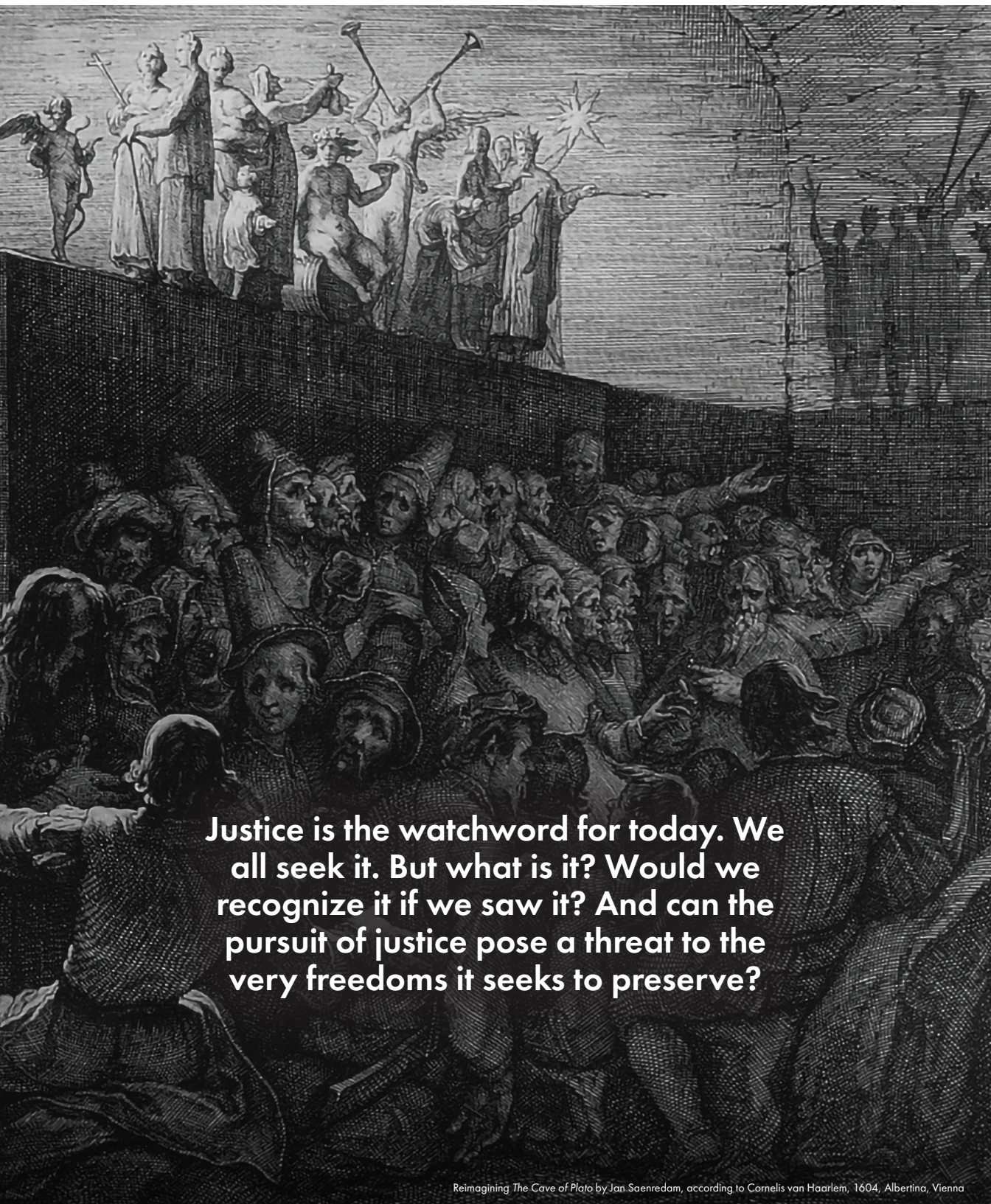
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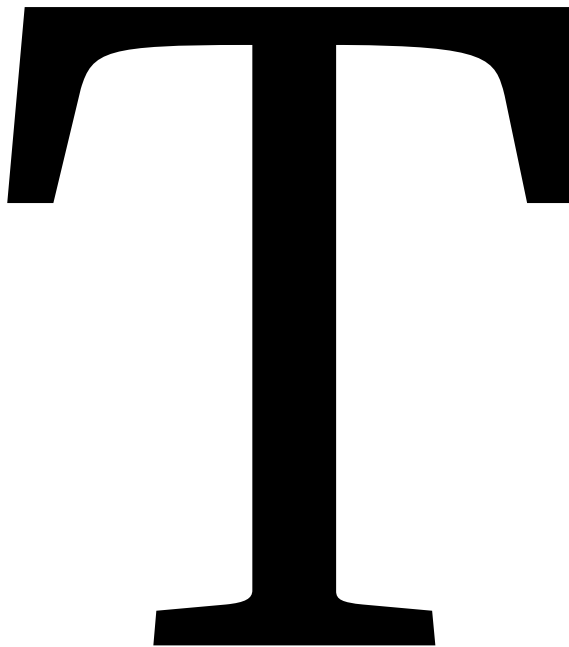
PLATO'S REPUBLIC AND OUR OWN

by JEFFREY POLET



Justice is the watchword for today. We all seek it. But what is it? Would we recognize it if we saw it? And can the pursuit of justice pose a threat to the very freedoms it seeks to preserve?

Reimagining *The Cave of Plato* by Jan Saenredam, according to Cornelis van Haarlem, 1604, Albertina, Vienna



THE EXPECTATIONS OF JUSTICE reside deeply within us. Figures in both the Hebraic and Hellenic worlds placed the demand for a just society at the center of their work. Those demands have echoed through the ages and into our streets. At the earliest of ages we complain about things we deem unfair and dog our parents over broken promises. Of all the virtues, justice seems most ingrained. And yet it is the one most likely to create havoc and wreak confusion. We seem to have a clear understanding of what courage demands, and we rarely talk about prudence and temperance except elliptically, but our insistence on justice relates inversely to our understanding of it.

“
**THE *REPUBLIC* DISPLAYS
THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL
LIFE, THE STRUGGLE
AND TRAVAILS OF THE
AGON THAT RESTS AT
THE CENTER OF OUR
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MUTUALLY SATISFYING
SHARED EXISTENCE.**
”

Nowhere is this dynamic presented more compellingly than in the central text on the problem of justice: Plato's *Republic*. On the one hand, Socrates is responding to the pleas of the youth of the city: What is this thing we call justice? How can we participate in the life of a city that has become so corrupt? Can one participate in politics without losing the integrity of one's soul? What guidance can our elders give us? What prospects await us if justice cannot prevail?

These questions are perennial and point to the ongoing relevance of the dialogue, for nowhere are these questions more thoroughly explored nor the difficulty of providing answers more dramatically demonstrated. Indeed, like many of the dialogues, the *Republic* displays the drama of social life, the struggle and travails of the agon that rests at the center of our efforts to forge a mutually satisfying shared existence. This drama, we may observe, will always most keenly be felt by the youth of the city who, without the tempering influence of experience and its concomitant wisdom, turn their uncertainty and frustration into either collectivized radicalism or individualized hedonism.

The *Republic* is inexhaustible and thus resists summation, but I want to draw the reader's attention to three main points, and then connect this to the problem of justice as conceived in our constitutional system.

Glaucon and Adeimantus, the brothers of Plato and students of Socrates, engage the latter in conversation in the home of Cephalus, one of the elder

statesmen of democratic Athens. They are there at the invitation of Polemarchus, the son of Cephalus, who briefly attempts to defend the view that justice is doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies. Although Cephalus himself plays a minor role in the dialogue, his short-lived participation reflects the conventional wisdom of "those who have gone ahead of us ... on a road which we too will probably have to travel." Cephalus' view of justice may be summed up as "being truthful, and giving back to others what you owe them," a view that Socrates demonstrates might commit us to all kinds of wrongdoing. The details of the argument need not concern us as much as the fact that Cephalus has no capacity to defend the position.

This is the general problem with conventions, of course. Drawn from the Latin for "an agreement or a meeting," conventions may be acceded to without being understood. Notice the root relationship to the word *convenient* and its meaning of "becoming suitable." Conventions aren't necessarily false or meaningless or unproductive of what is good, but neither are they necessarily true or meaningful or productive, and thus admit of critical investigation. In the hands of leaders such as Cephalus, no critical investigation has taken place, nor can it, in no small part because, as Socrates observes, Cephalus' definition bears a relationship to both his wealth and his status. The effort to make of justice a universal value can't be placed on so unsteady a foundation.

The expectation that kings be philosophers or that philosophers be kings is an unrealistic one, but kings surely need philosophers as council. The good relates directly to the true, after all. At this point in the dialogue, the young people in the room cast a skeptical eye at Cephalus, for his "privilege" has insulated him

from both the consequences of his definition and, more damningly, any existential need to question it. Cephalus no longer shares in the same social and political world as the youth, except in the most rudimentary sense. Conventions are not fungible, but money is, and Cephalus notes that it is precisely his wealth that makes it possible for him to pay his debts, and thus "wealth is particularly useful in this context."

DESCENDING AND ASCENDING

A second feature of the dialogue involves its overall structure. The *Republic* both begins and ends with an act of descending, and throughout the dialogue we are treated to a series of contrasting ascents and descents. The famous allegory of the cave from book 7 is a microcosm of this overall structure. Having already descended into the cave, one of the prisoners breaks free from his chains and commences the process of ascent (beginning with the *periagoge*, or turning around—a conversion). The prisoner must then again descend into the cave, before ascending once again. The "city in speech" contrasts with the infirm polis; the *paradeigma ek uranos* (paradigm in heaven) contrasts with the earthly city of Athens.

This contrasting of opposites is central to Plato's overall strategy of getting some traction on the truth by discovering what it's not (or *apophasis*). Our understandings of justice are largely derived from experiences of injustice. Indeed, a central feature of the natural law is that it can receive very little, if any, positive explication. It acts largely as an injunction, such injunctions receiving their force from a deep moral sense. Antigone to Creon, Boethius to Lady Wisdom, Martin Luther King in the Birmingham jail, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to his jailers, all attest to a higher order they discover as a result of experiencing breaches of justice (473d). C.S. Lewis states this well in *Mere Christianity* when he expresses the anger we experience when we briefly get up from a chair we are sitting in at a coffee shop and return to find someone has taken our place. "That's my chair" has no legal claim, but it has a moral one. For Plato, as for the other youth of Athens, the determinative event of his life was that the city had put to death "the most just man I ever knew." The condemnation at the trial of Socrates was, in fact, the condemnation of Athens.

Plato consistently draws on this moral sense that we have a longing for justice (443b). We might not have a clear idea of what is due another person, but we are familiar with the problem of *pleonexia* (getting

Painting by Philipp Foltz depicting Athenian politician Pericles delivering an oration before the Assembly (1852)



“
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YOUNG PERSON CAN’T
TELL WHEN SOMETHING
IS ALLEGORICAL AND
WHEN IT ISN’T.’**
”

more than one’s share) and how it both consumes and divides polity and soul. We might not have a clear idea of what a philosopher is, but we all have experiences with philodoxers, those lovers of opinion who never express an original or interesting thought. We may not be able to express the nature of beauty well, but the features of ugliness are readily apparent. We may struggle to find and tell stories that express the truth of who we are, but anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear can identify the proliferation of bad ones.

TELL US A STORY

The central point of the dialogue—that Plato is creating an educational polis—is often overlooked: The most powerful people in any society are neither statesmen nor plutocrats, but the storytellers (377b). Woe to us if our statesmen control the content of storytelling or the plutocrats have seized control of the instruments of storytelling. Socrates asserts that, virtue being the most important thing, stories that celebrate vice and undercut virtue must be prohibited (378b), for “a young person can’t tell when something is allegorical and when it isn’t, and

any idea admitted by a person of that age tends to become almost ineradicable and permanent. All things considered, then, that is why a very great deal of importance should be placed upon ensuring that the first stories they hear are best adapted to their moral improvement” (378e).

In one particularly significant contrast, Plato juxtaposes *polypragmasune* (minding the deeds of others, or colloquially, sticking your nose into their business) with the fact that justice demands of each citizen to “do your job” (423d). No well-ordered polity can evolve without this imperative. It has different parts, however. First of all, it requires that people be given jobs for which they are well suited, a claim that rubs against our oft-stated but obviously foolish belief that any person can become whatever that person wants. Such a belief will result in rampant incompetence. Self-government, in both senses of that term, requires competency (455b) in a wide array of practices.

Competence being an essential element of “doing your job,” it must be accompanied by a sense of personal and civic responsibility. This sense of responsibility prevents both shirking and the exploitation of the job for purely personal benefit. The job must contain that element of service. Furthermore, “doing your job” means not trying to do someone else’s job, nor allowing someone else to do your job. No “good man” will tolerate being told what to do (425e). Pride in a job well done results from not having someone else do it for you, but it also means that you have protected your realm of responsibility from intrusion by another. Despite his recommendations for the education of the guardian class, Plato recognizes that parents would resent intrusion by the polity into their prerogatives. The moral seriousness of this point is captured by the Catholic idea of subsidiarity.

A final observation about the dialogue brings us back to where we started, and that is, after hours and hours after intensive discussion, we have a pretty good idea of what justice isn’t, but no clear idea of what it is. At those moments where it becomes evident to the reader that Socrates can’t provide us with dogma concerning the nature of the good life, he resorts to mythmaking. Just like the conclusions to the *Statesman* and the *Gorgias*, the *Republic* ends with a myth of judgment in death that tries to persuade the listener that the life of virtue is to be preferred above all others. Such truth cannot be articulated in propositions but only discovered in the existential pull on the soul. The fact that justice cannot be turned into a



The Federalist authors Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, shown on either side of Benjamin Franklin, in Howard Chandler Christy's 1940 painting, *Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*

set of propositions—and certainly not into slogans—will always frustrate those who cloak the desire for power in the robes of justice.

THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

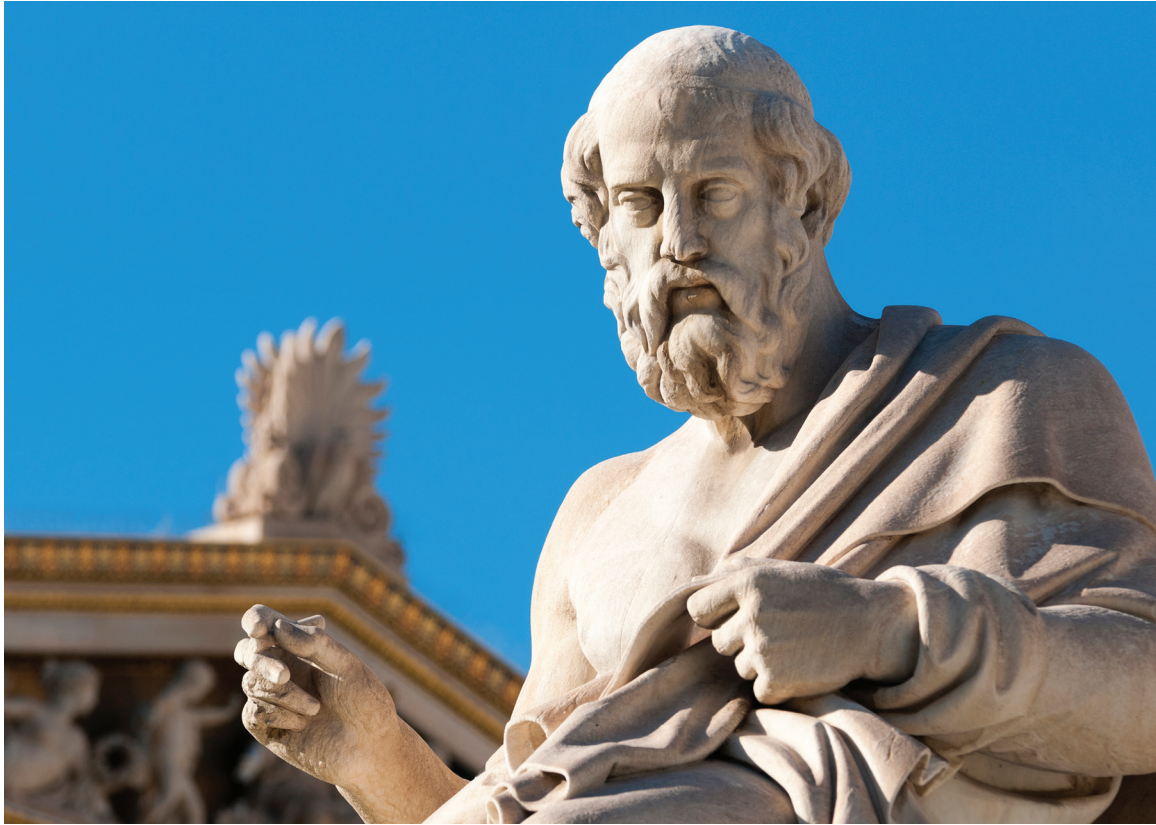
The prospects of justice in this world are grim. Like truth, it can be the possession of no person or movement. Its relationship to liberty is fitful, for as the latter expands, the claims of virtue often contract. When autonomy becomes our defining feature (557b), we rapidly devolve into lotus-eaters (560c) who “indulge in every passing desire that each day brings” (561c). Libertinism brings as its handmaiden egalitarianism (561e): each inconsequential person, in the words of Tocqueville, glutting his or her soul with petty pleasures. Plato contrasts this with “the competence and the knowledge to distinguish a good life from a bad one,” and “to weigh up all the things we’ve been talking about” in both their particularity and universality. Justice requires a person be attendant to particulars and circumstances, and learn how “to make a rational choice from among all the alternatives,” which the person must do “during his lifetime” (618c-e). This application of practical reasoning to the problem of justice, the attendance to both word and deed within time, marks the actual Plato as opposed to the “idealistic” version often given to us.

Nonetheless, Plato’s ideal state has troubled liberal thinkers, who find the Greek’s ideas too illiberal

for their tastes. The quasi-communism involved in the education of the guardian class along with the censorious authority of the rulers unnerves modern readers. And while Plato gives us a guide for thinking about “public things,” it certainly isn’t a democratic republic to which he leads us. References to “the noble lie” and “the myth of the metals” and the “talk about the gods” all underscore Plato’s concern that no good polity can survive without a compelling principle of unity. Surely this is at the core of “the anthropological principle” whereby Plato analogizes the soul to the city, and indeed only talks about the city because it is “the soul writ large,” the central thing about which he wants to find the truth.

Plato’s efforts to get us to understand justice hinge on whether we accept the validity of the anthropological principle. Even if we live in an age of fractured personality, serious thinkers will recognize the need for an integrated self and realize that such integration requires a unifying principle that can harmonize otherwise disparate parts. Without an interest in such integration, we would be at a loss to describe why hypocrisy bothers us so. We regard a unified self to be a person of high character and a fractured self to be a good-for-nothing. Whatever criticisms we might offer of the anthropological principle, they don’t unsettle the self-evident truth established by a unified personality, nor would those criticisms undo our sense that, without some unifying principle, politics would soon deteriorate into war.

Contemporary criticisms of liberalism consistently miss the fact that liberalism is an effort to find



Statue of Plato at The Academy of Athens

some basis of unity in the *middle* of violent conflict and that, as importantly, such a principle of unity cannot be established by coercion alone. The liberal solution (to the degree that there is one) and its success rests on the clever hiding of a unifying principle as a way of making it less susceptible to dispute, and such obscuring is virtually required by the demands of freedom. In this sense, the liberal determination of the problem marks a serious advancement over the Platonic solution with its scant attention to freedom, a solution that becomes so impracticable that the principle of unity is contained and carried within the soul of the philosopher from where it radiates out into the order of the city itself. The philosopher has such “reverence” for this underlying principle that he will, Plato argues in “The Seventh Letter,” shrink “from putting it forth into a world of discord and uncomeliness.” But such is the world we inhabit. Our constitutional system is predicated on taking men as they are and not as we wish them to be, and this realism in turn operates, almost ironically, as a unifying principle. Rather than dreaming

of a world without “discord and uncomeliness,” the framers of our Constitution attempted to create a system that could accept interest and passion as a feature of politics while acknowledging a mutual commitment to the common good as articulated in the Constitution’s Preamble. Neither were they quick to assume that the idiosyncrasies inherent in passion and interest were necessarily immoral. Instead of dismissing interest as inimical to unity, the framers of our Constitution believed that the divisions themselves could be turned to justice’s (and truth’s) advantage. This strategy of balancing unity and division (*E pluribus unum*) was at the heart of Orestes Brownson’s observation that American constitutionalism represented a great leap forward in the human understanding of ordered liberty, and that justice was best served not in the rule of the philosopher but in a set of institutional arrangements that could maintain freedom while acknowledging the need for energetic rule.

Consider here Publius’ defense of the Constitution as found in *The Federalist Papers*. In *Federalist* 9,

Hamilton argued that the great innovation in the “new science of politics” that makes an extended republic possible was a deeper understanding of the principles of representation. Only by properly creating a system of representation could the Constitution stabilize the government in its vacillations between tyranny and anarchy, and also ensure that government retained its just powers in the consent of the governed. In other words, the establishment of justice involved the creation of governing institutions that derived their power from the people while at the same time restrained the popular passions that could devolve into anarchy or result in tyranny. Democracies always had to fear becoming either of these things—think of book 8 of Plato’s *Republic* (discussed earlier)—and while tyranny results from a surfeit of power, anarchy tended to result from an excess of liberty. Thus Hamilton, in *Federalist* 62, argued that “liberty may be endangered by the abuses of liberty as well as by the abuses of power” and insisted that “there are numerous instances of the former as well as of the latter; and that the former, rather than the latter, are apparently most to be apprehended by the United States.” This fear that *liberty* was a greater threat to justice than was the desire for power undergirded almost all of Publius’ reflections on the matter.

Madison, in *Federalist* 47–51, after having laid out the arguments for the distribution of power between the federal government and the states, and having identified the specific powers attributed to the federal government, turned his attention to the form of the federal government. The separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial functions, he asserted, was an essential safeguard for the preservation of liberty. In *Federalist* 48, meanwhile, he argued that the powers of the different branches couldn’t be so separated from one another as to render the new government imbecilic. Furthermore, liberty was best protected not only when powers were separated, but when powers were shared by separate branches. Simply fixing boundaries in the text of the Constitution provided a mere “parchment barrier” that could not withstand power’s encroaching tendencies (or the effort to take over someone else’s job). The evidence of the inadequacy of these parchment barriers could be discerned in the tumultuous politics of the states where “the legislative department is everywhere extending the sphere of its activity, and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex.” In a democracy, Madison believed, the greatest threat of tyranny came from the legislative

branch, not the executive or judicial, and so that was the one whose powers had most to be curtailed.

The inadequacy of written prohibitions led Madison to conclude that tyranny could only be prevented when ambition was made to counteract ambition, and that meant that “the interests of the man must be connected to the constitutional rights of the place.” In other words, by giving the members of each of the branches of government specific but also consequential powers, their interest in power would motivate them to resist the encroaching efforts of the other branches, and thus they had to be provided with the tools necessary to resist such efforts. Madison assumed that people in government possessed limited turf, and for that reason would zealously and jealously guard it. Thus the instituted systems would be effectively self-regulating. A dependence on the people remained the primary check on government, but experience, he observed, impressed upon us the need for auxiliary precautions. Taking men as they are and not as we wish them to be—and them not being, after all, angels—the lust for power could be placed isometrically in a system of mutual frustration. The private interest of each actor thus



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“

**WE WILL TAKE TO THE
STREETS DEMANDING
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HOLDS PLACARDS
CALLING FOR PRUDENCE.**

”

acted as “a sentinel” over the public good. These constitutional inventions, he argued, were dictated by prudence and experience. The demands of practical reason meant weakening the legislature while strengthening the executive. This division of power within the federal government, when combined with the principle of federalism, provided “a double security” against power’s tyrannical tendencies.

Here Madison connects the constitutional provisions to the paradoxical tension that lies at the heart of the republican system: On the one hand, the government had to rest on the consent of the people, but on the other hand the people had a tendency to oppress and vex one another, and would use the instruments of government as tools to accomplish such. In other words, the constitutional separation of powers might ameliorate the problem of government corruption, but it couldn’t mitigate the equally troublesome problem of faction. Surely that is what Hamilton was referring to in the aforementioned quote from *Federalist* 62, for Madison had already established in *Federalist* 10 that liberty is to faction what air is to fire, and the establishment of justice would require recognizing not only the threats that accompanied the formations of power, but also the dangers inherent in liberty itself, particularly as they manifested themselves in factions.

“There are,” Madison wrote, “but two methods of providing against this evil: the one by creating a will in the community independent of the majority that is, of the society itself; the other, by comprehending in the society so many separate descriptions of citizens as will render an unjust combination of a majority of the whole very improbable, if not impracticable.” In short, only by the *fracturing* of society itself could the security against faction be realized,

and this fracturing represented moral progress over insistence on unity that either mirrored Plato’s educative state that gave everyone the same opinions, or its anticipation in the progressive claim that unity could be achieved by transforming human nature. That fracturing, in turn, could be accomplished by different means, and indeed in many ways existed naturally, but in any case would result *from* liberty. By ensuring that people had a right to think freely, to worship according to the dictates of their conscience, to associate with one another on their own terms, to prefer the well-being of their localities to that of other places, and to allow for the natural proliferation of discrete and particular interests among the different classes that composed society—in other words, the free exercise of our natural tendencies as human beings—the dangerous ascendancy of any one faction or combination of them could be mitigated. Institutions in a federal system, operating out of the extended sphere, thus rendered factions impotent while allowing freedom to flourish. By decreasing the dangers of faction without imposing a unifying principle, the constitutional system could simultaneously decrease the need for more powerful national governing institutions.

Madison intentionally juxtaposes his solution to the strong-armed efforts of Socrates that resulted in “noble lies,” repression of false “talk about the gods,” the eviction of the poets from the city, and the rule of the philosopher king. Instead, we live in a world where “enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm” and, in the public realm, even if every person were a Socrates, every assembly would still be a mob. Nonetheless, Publius balanced the agonism of factional politics with the conviction that Americans remained unified by common experiences, commitments, and beliefs—in short, a common culture whose capital could not be spent down without replenishing it, an idea to which Washington testified in his farewell address. The threatening feistiness of our contemporary politics reminds us of both the need for a principle of unity as well as the dangers inherent in locating that principle in a particular person or faction.

JUSTICE AS THREAT

Understanding the nature of this delicate balance, Madison offered in *Federalist* 51 this fascinating observation: “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be

lost in the pursuit.” Why would liberty be lost in the pursuit of justice? What is it about justice that makes it a potential threat to liberty? Let me suggest various reasons why this might be the case.

First, of the four cardinal virtues, justice is the one that admits of the most confusion, as we saw in our discussion of the *Republic*. This makes justice peculiar among the four cardinal virtues. We have a pretty good idea what courage and temperance and prudence are, but the essence of justice eludes us. This nebulous quality makes it capable of producing prodigious and dangerous errors in its name. It’s in the nature of prudence and temperance that we can’t really be mistaken in our exercise of them, and while we may be mistaken in our exercise of courage, perhaps only once. But justice seems to admit of infinite error when we act in its name.

This indefinite nature is in part why justice admits of appending endless qualifiers. We know about distributive and retributive justice, procedural and restorative, but we also now hear of racial justice, environmental justice, criminal justice, sexual justice, and so forth. It wouldn’t make much sense for us to talk about racial courage, or criminal prudence,

or environmental temperance. We will take to the streets demanding justice, but no one holds placards calling for prudence. The desire for justice inflames our passions in a way the other virtues don’t, and it also seems to connect directly to our interests. Indeed, we too often dress our naked interests in the cloak of justice.

One cause of confusion is that justice is a relational virtue, whereas the other three cardinal virtues refer primarily to the self. I am temperate or I am courageous; but justice refers to the ways in which persons relate to one another or to the whole. A *statesman* may be courageous or temperate, but we expect a *regime* to be just. The relational aspect of justice is testified to by the fact that we react strongly to breaches of fairness. It’s one of the first things we learn as children. Few things upset us more than the sense that something isn’t fair, and that experience of being upset often results in bitterness and resentment. Freud, for example, noted that the religious impulse emerged largely from the anger we feel from living in a world where the evil are rewarded and the good are punished. We created the idea of an afterlife, he argued, simply to satisfy our sense that good should be rewarded and



evil punished, and the final judgment, sorting that all out, is where justice gets resolved. People will finally get what's coming to them.

This draws our attention to the fact that justice has an important restorative function. Not only when harmony and balance are disrupted, but when our moral sense has been violated in some way, justice comes to the fore and demands that things be set right. Thus clemency is part of justice. In *Federalist* 17, as well as in his meditations on the pardoning power in *Federalist* 74, Hamilton directly connects the two to each other. Justice without grace soon becomes embittered and resentful. Nietzsche observed that, God being dead, we now had to baptize ourselves into our own clemency, invent our own rituals and sacred games. "Justice!" Nietzsche wrote, "I'd sooner have people steal from me than be surrounded by scarecrows and hungry looks; that is my taste. And this is by all means a matter of taste, nothing more." Nietzsche thus demonstrates that the idea of justice can't survive the acids of subjectivism and relativism. Even more damningly, Zarathustra admonishes his disciples to "mistrust all who talk much of their justice! Verily, their souls lack more than honey. And

when they call themselves the good and the just, do not forget that they would be pharisees, if only they had—power."

This pharisaism has become a central feature of our politics, and it characteristically refuses to accept disagreement as a condition for knowing: The Pharisees (and I'm using the term in its pejorative, not historical, sense) are convinced they already possess the fullness of truth and understand clearly the demands of justice—such conviction having been long ago undone by Socratic ignorance, and warned against by Publius. Whatever else is true about campus and communal battles over social justice, one would have to be willfully blind not to see how the grasping for power drives the enterprise. But such grasping for power should not lead us to the conclusion that there is therefore no underlying moral impulse. This is the great danger of our time: an unwillingness to see in our opponents some reaching for a moral truth and our concomitant inability to consider we might be wrong.

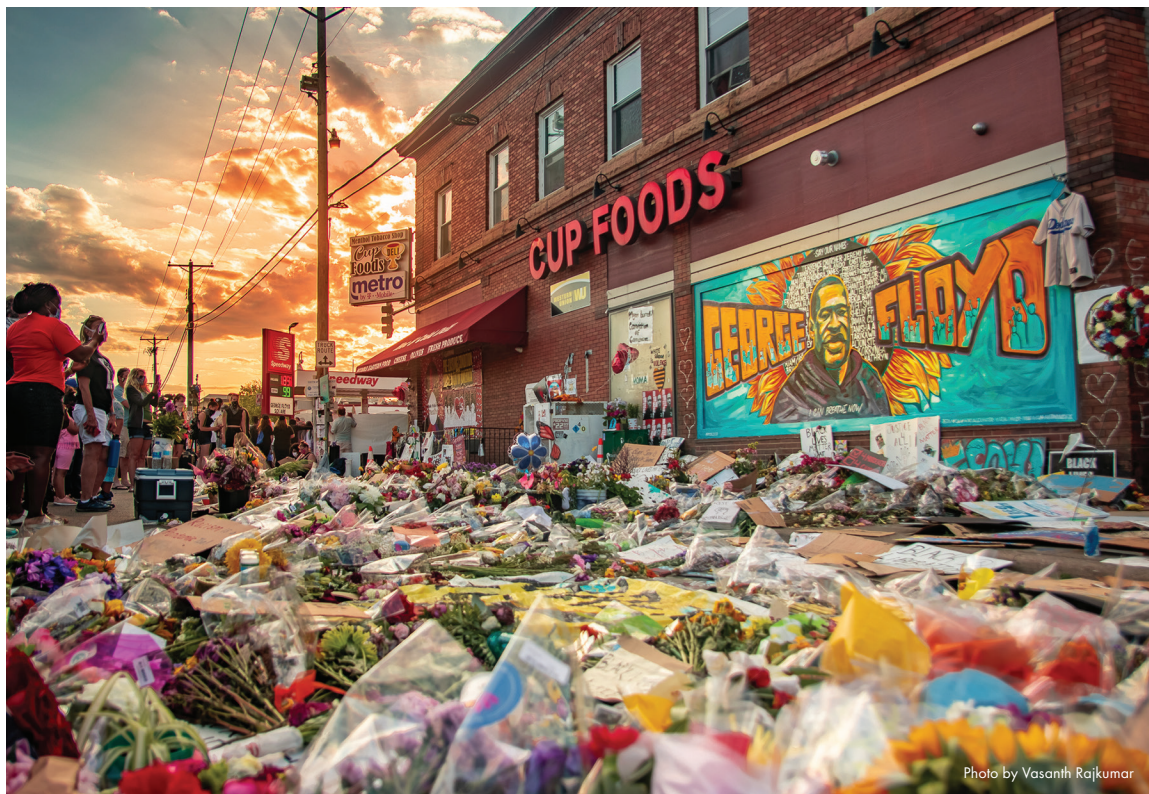
Part of the problem is that certainty renders politics sterile and predictable. Consider, for example, debates that consumed the country following the death of George Floyd. Tell me how someone voted in the 2016 election and I'll tell you exactly how they reacted to news of Floyd's death. I'll go even further and tell you whether they consider Ron DeSantis guilty of a "gay ban" or whether he is sensitively responding to the moral demands of parents. In all instances, the system of mutual frustration set up by our Constitution gets undone by the pincer effect of impatience and conviction, an effect exacerbated by the hothouse of our corrupted media environment. We have all become philosopher-kings and have no need of restraints. As a result, injustice will disguise itself as justice; immorality as morality; repression as tolerance; uniformity as diversity. Behind it all is the imposition of will.

AGONIZING AGONISM

Surely part of our cultural battles involve our tendency to substitute a principle of unity for the unsettling agonism of our constitutional system. But here is where the difficulty resides. When Tocqueville noted that religion was the first among our democratic institutions, he referred to it not simply in a formal sense, but in the sense that underneath all the roiling turmoil of democratic life, religion provided a stabilizing influence that could rein in democracy's

Nietzsche's sentiments echoed on the cover of *TIME* in 1966





Flowers and tributes placed near where George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis

excesses. Religion, he believed, was the bit in the mouth of the democratic horse that might enable us to guide and restrain democracy's spiritedness, to "tame the democratic beast." But would the horse chew up the bit, and if so, what might take its place to keep democracy from careening over a cliff?

Tocqueville rightly expressed concern that, without true religion, Americans would settle on either a false one or would descend into a *dogmatomachy* (war of ideological certitudes). This battle would intensify as the underlying cultural consensus collapsed. Competing groups would thus seek to impose a particular version of "their truth" as "THE truth." Indeed, debates over our founding myths (1619 or 1776?), Catholic integralism, and "wokeism" reflect efforts to replace America's largely hidden religious self-understanding with a new set of myths. The philosophical project of the day, therefore, reflects that of Plato: to expose false talk about the gods while at the same time restoring intellectual humility to its rightful place. It seems to me that Madison was on the right track. The falseness of the woke religion is testified to in no small part by the viciousness of

its tactics: its deplatforming, its canceling, its intolerance, its absence of humor, and its violence in the streets. Its justice is a harsh and unyielding one, separating sheep from goats. The absence of charity is not a bug but a feature, as it will be of any god that fails. In that sense, devotees of true religion may serve like Elijah, mocking the priests of Ba'al as they perform their empty rituals while testifying to the true God in simple acts of faith.

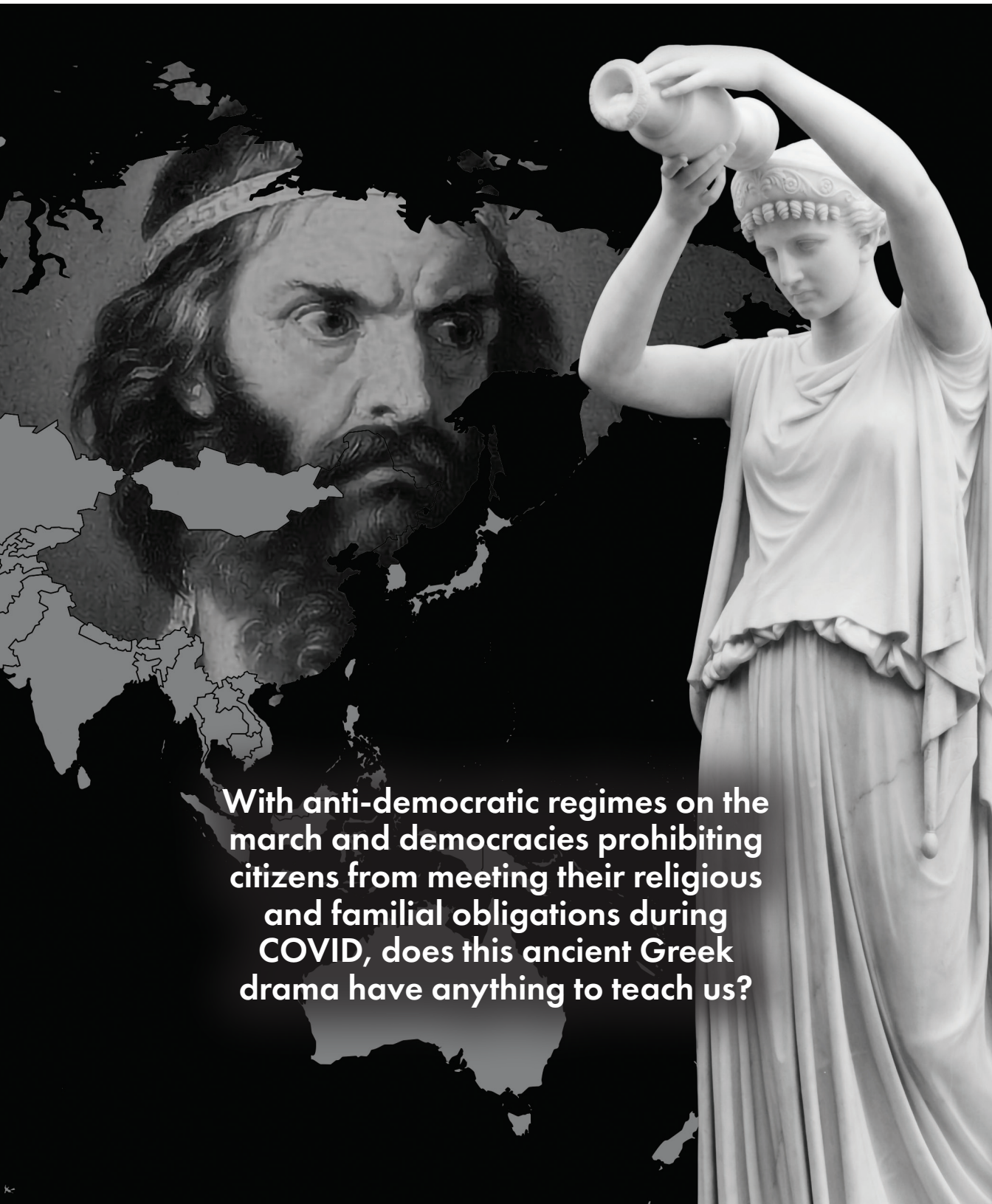
Our obsession for justice can close us off to what is good. This relates to Madison's point, I think, in *Federalist* 51: There "liberty" refers to the institutions of representative, divided, and federalized government, and when people become consumed with the demand for justice, they will destroy those institutions rather than live in a world they think imperfect. The demand for perfect justice will result in the worst kinds of injustice. **RL**

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ANTIGONE: A HERO FOR OUR TIME

by JONATHAN LEAF



With anti-democratic regimes on the march and democracies prohibiting citizens from meeting their religious and familial obligations during COVID, does this ancient Greek drama have anything to teach us?

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SOPHOCLES' ANTIGONE IS A RORSCHACH TEST.

People see in it whatever they are thinking. To the self-professed and much married communist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, Antigone is a “bitch,” though she may also be an admirable figure in her zealous and determined striving against her government. Or perhaps, Žižek suggests alternately, she is a troublemaker creating havoc within an otherwise healthy, well-organized state. In recent versions of the play that he has published with differing endings, Žižek has put forward both points of view. More common interpretations, however, see Antigone not as a rebel but as a self-obsessed martyr and a fanatic.

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Are her actions even political? That is a further point of dispute. More than a few critics have noted that Antigone shows little concern with what will become of her home city, Thebes, after her death. She is indifferent to the ultimate interests of the city-state, the *polis*, in which she lives. Hence, one can argue that she is not political at all; she is apolitical.

There is also the question of whether she is even the play's protagonist. The role of the city's autocrat, her uncle Creon, is as large as her own, and the story concludes with a focus upon his misfortunes. That has prompted many critics, directors, and actors to conclude that she is the antagonist in the story and that Creon is the real protagonist. This may explain in part a curious fact: While it is continually adapted and commented upon, until recently *Antigone* was not so often performed as were less famous classical tragedies such as *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, and even *Philoctetes*.

Nonetheless, throughout the 20th century Antigone served as source material for a great many highbrow playwrights, poets, and opera composers. Among these were Carl Orff, Arthur Honegger, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean Anouilh. Of these, only Anouilh's take on it ever managed to win favor with the public. I think that's understandable, as the play—and its various operatic and theatrical versions—are hampered by a number of flaws that are readily evident in Sophocles' original text. Unlike *Oedipus*, *Medea*, and *The Bacchae*, *Antigone* is largely void of spectacle. Antigone's aunt Eurydice,



Photo by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images

The Old Vic's 1949 production of *Antigone*, with Vivien Leigh as Antigone and George Ralph as Creon, King of Thebes

her intended husband, Haemon, and she herself all die offstage. Moreover, Antigone changes not at all during the course of the drama, and we get only a brief glimpse, at the play's denouement, of how its body count may have affected Creon. There is also some clumsy exposition and on-the-nose dialogue at a number of vital moments. The artless explanations weaken *Antigone's* early scenes as we listen to detailed accounts of the backstory: How Polynices is Antigone's brother, that he died during an invasion that aimed to restore him to Thebes' throne, that her other brother Eteocles also passed away in the conflict, and that Creon has called for the death of whomever might arrange a burial for Polynices. And that despite this royal decree, Antigone intends to meet her familial and religious obligations to her stricken brother.

UNYIELDING AND IMPRACTICAL

The want of subtlety regarding the characters' motives turns up most glaringly with the appearance of the guard sent to tell Creon that someone has sprinkled ashes upon Polynices' corpse. The watchman is fearful of the leader's wrath, as Creon has made it known that the carcass is to serve as carrion

for scavengers. When Antigone is revealed to be the one who transgressed against this injunction, the guard abruptly announces:

She denied nothing—at once to my joy and my pain. To have escaped from ills [punishment] oneself is a great joy; but it is painful to bring friends to ill. Nevertheless, all such things are of less account to me than my own safety.

Sophocles was capable of remarkably nuanced psychological presentation, depiction that depends upon what is implicit. This is not an instance of that.

The lack of refinement in characterization extends to Antigone herself, as she is not possessed of shading. Unyielding and impractical, she makes no secret of the fact that her intention is to act in such a manner as to bring about her death. More complex is Creon. His harshness and dogmatism hint at the insecurity of someone unsure of his status and authority. Sophocles further indicates this through Creon's repeated claim that if he yields to Antigone's desire for a proper burial for her brother—his own nephew—that he will be proven to be effeminate and that she will now be the man and he the woman in their relationship. Likewise, Creon's repeated habit

of suggesting that those who disagree with him are motivated by bribes tells us that he is unduly concerned with money.

Less often does Creon rely upon a more rational defense of his actions: that honoring Polynices with a traditional burial after he led an army that invaded Thebes will encourage further assaults against the city. In one of the play's first scenes, Creon says of Polynices that he "came back from exile and sought to consume utterly with fire the city of his fathers and the shrines of his fathers' gods, sought to taste of kindred blood and to lead the remnant into slavery." One might discount this as the words of a demagogue who wishes to justify his own rule while disparaging those seeking to displace him. Yet this was the world in which the ancient Greeks lived. Competing city-states did destroy each other and then take their defeated enemies as prisoners of war. Indeed, the comment has a peculiar aspect of prophecy for Thebes. First presented at one of the Athenian drama festivals in 441 B.C., *Antigone* is a product of the Periclean Age. This was the time of peace and prosperity in which the Parthenon was constructed. Yet there must have been a consciousness of how infirm this period of ease and accomplishment was. Within a decade, Athens was plunged into the Peloponnesian War. That conflict lasted 27 years, and it involved

nearly every city-state of Greece. At its end, Athens had been routed, and its democracy was replaced with a brutal oligarchy. Seventy years later the Athenians were conquered once more, this time by Alexander the Great. The people of their nearby city-state, the Thebans, chose to revolt against the new emperor. Alexander responded to this by burning to the ground the city in which Oedipus and Antigone are said to have lived. All the city's temples and shrines were razed, except for one dedicated to the poet Pindar. It was spared only because Pindar had praised one of Alexander's ancestors. Afterward, the surviving population of the city, numbering 30,000, was sold into slavery.

It is in this sense that the idea of barbarity and war being just outside the city gates, implicit within the play, explains the greatest part of the renewed interest in *Antigone*. At the commencement of the Iraq War, a sometime acquaintance of mine named Sharron Bower put together The Lysistrata Project. As a determined foe of the planned U.S. invasion of Iraq, she helped create an organization that sponsored thousands of readings and productions of Aristophanes' comedy about an end to the Peloponnesian War brought by a sex strike of the women of Athens and Sparta. In 2003 a classical play about peaceful conflict resolution seemed relevant—most particularly

The ruins of the theater of Dionysus in Athens, where Sophocles' dramas were originally performed





THE PLAY TAKES ON A DIFFERENT MEANING AND RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID PANDEMIC.



to scores of out-of-work actors and actresses. But the great foreboding of Western intellectuals lies elsewhere now. When the U.S. and our “coalition of the willing” marched into Baghdad, the U.S. was *the* dominant power in the world. The sense that we are not any longer fills people with dread and fear.

NEW ANTIGONES FOR A NEW ERA

Most Western intellectuals continue to assume that gross violations of human rights—like slavery and genocide—are universally scorned relics of an earlier, more barbaric age. Yet the actions of tyrannical regimes like those in China and Russia are telling us unambiguously that this is not so, and that they could well return (if they have not done so already). After all, if Russia’s leaders will put forward not-so-veiled threats of using nuclear weapons and China’s will take and sell the bodily organs of living political prisoners, why should we assume they will not enslave or kill subject peoples if they think they can do so without consequence? There is a not-quite-linear relationship between the reawakening of interest in *Antigone* and a growing awareness that it was the fact of American hegemony that played a role in preventing such savagery.

That fascination with *Antigone* is manifested in Žižek’s decision to publish new versions of the play with his proposed alternate endings. But he is one of many such editors. In 2012 the acclaimed Canadian poetess Anne Carson presented her version of the drama. In 2017 two novels based on *Antigone* were published, along with a film adaptation. Another movie was released in 2019, followed by one more last year, and there have also been any number of new stage versions. Perhaps the best-known of these was

Irish novelist Colm Tóibín’s *Pale Sister*. Delayed by the pandemic, it arrived in the West End last year in a production directed by former Royal Shakespeare Company artistic director Sir Trevor Nunn.

Several of these accounts turn Polynices into a captured terrorist. The question presented to the audience is whether we should treat those who advocate for them with respect or hostility. These authors reinterpret the drama in terms of the conflict between the Western and the non-Western worlds. The much-lauded 2019 Canadian film *Antigone* offers a slight variation on this. Confronted by the possibility of conviction for some petty crimes, Polynices faces deportation back to the disordered village in Algeria from which he has come. In this version of the story, *Antigone* tries to assist him in an attempted escape from a Quebec jail. However, in trying to save him, *Antigone* brings about her own demise.

These updatings display a concern for the “other.” In particular, they tend to show sympathy for Islam. Yet there is still an implicit acknowledgment that the decline of American power and the appearance of non-Western minorities in Western cities will likely lead to violence and conflict. Whether or not it is their aim, these productions are conveying to us that the retreat of American armed forces from chaotic foreign lands and the appearance of immigrants from those nations is not an unmixed blessing. In addition, they provide an expanded and more dynamic view of *Antigone*, one in which she more clearly takes on the role of doomed protagonist. In all these visions, *Antigone* is a drama of unresolved conflict.

HEALTH AND POLITICS

The play takes on a different meaning and relevance in the context of the COVID pandemic. As we all know, lockdowns required us to stay away from people who were infected and from those whom we thought might be. This meant that people could not attend burials—just like *Antigone*. This rejection of our most important rituals was also a spurning of the traditions of religious faith. The response to this of the novelist Walter Kirn is typical. Prohibited from seeing his father, dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease), in May 2020, he now increasingly rejects the views and claims of the liberal establishment, embittered as he is. One wishes that this had not been so common an experience. That it was serves as another explanation for the current interest in the play. For this was what *Antigone* underwent, and this



brings us back to one of the most essential subjects that Sophocles was underscoring: proper observance of custom and due regard for faith, even when they come into conflict with the State.

Greek theater was religious drama, and the play's premiere was at the Festival of Dionysius, a venerated holiday. Athens was the most devout city in Greece, and, judging the play from this perspective, our sense for *Antigone's* character necessarily shifts as the play's meaning goes from conflict to piety. *Antigone's* claim that she must bury her brother is part of her broader claim of inheritance as an *epikleros*. Under Athenian law, women could not own property. But they could take possession of it as a sole surviving daughter (or sister) if they married a male relative. This functioned to keep property within the family. *Antigone's* intended nuptials with Creon's son, Haemon, may have been understood by Sophocles' audience as offering this additional purpose, as he was her cousin. It would then have been a necessity for her to bury her brother before she made any claims upon his estate. To do otherwise would have been unseemly. That is so even if we leave aside the question of how a devout person would have regarded the act of leaving a corpse out for scavengers. Ancient Athenians were unlike other Greeks in that they cremated their dead rather than burying them. Even so, Creon's dogged insistence that Polynices' carcass be left for jackals would have been seen by an Athenian as an incitement, a conscious act of disrespect for the gods.

Of course, burial and cremation have another purpose: preservation of public health. This is another

way in which the Athenians' interests and experiences parallel our own. That's because Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the end of the Periclean Age were in part a consequence of an outbreak of infectious disease. Eleven years after *Antigone* premiered, Athens was struck by the plague. It's estimated that 300,000 Greeks were killed. One-fourth of these deaths were in the highly urbanized state of Athens. Lost, too, were their leader, Pericles, and 4,000 of their hoplites: crack troops. Although these events came after *Antigone* was written, they did not occur before *Oedipus* was composed. That tragedy was presented in 429 B.C. This was right in the middle of the two years in which the plague hit Athens with greatest force. Its appearance, it seems, came in between the waves of disease. Should we then be so surprised by its subject: a city afflicted by a terrible infectious malady seeking out the cause? There may never have been so timely a drama, nor one that its audience would have perceived so directly as a commentary on its troubles. Present-day AIDS dramas on Broadway are comments on the fairly remote past. The Theban plays dealt with current events.

I saw this firsthand as I got involved with the work of providing meals to New York's homeless in the fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021. COVID had a devastating effect on efforts to feed the city's hungry and destitute. Because people were fearful of close contact with the homeless, many shelters found that their soup kitchens were suddenly void of volunteers—and even paid workers. That left those most in need of food without regular meals right

when it was most necessary. In a few short months, the greater number of those on the streets became noticeably more gaunt and haggard. Concerned by this, I began making it my business to deliver meals to homeless people in New York's Financial District.

It was an education. Getting to know some by name and others by face, I came to realize how varied they were. Some, I learned, were neither crazy nor ignorant. Indeed, one day I found myself beside an older, wizened figure named Roman who was reading a battered paperback copy of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*. In this fashion, I received a critical take on a notable work of French modernism from a street person.

While this was surely not Antigone's experience, she is closer to the people than Creon is, and as Haemon points this out, the masses support her. If she displays a measure of self-conceit, she is plainly a foe of the elites and of elitism. That perspective gains in significance during a time of contagion as those in charge place a distance between themselves and ordinary folk. Sophocles makes his own view of this clear through the arrival in the play of the blind prophet Tiresias. Tiresias tells Creon that he is in the wrong and that the gods approve of Antigone's actions. Without doubt, then, Sophocles was presenting a political message to his audiences, one they would have had no trouble interpreting.

This extends far beyond the matter of public health or even devotion. During the Periclean Age, a number of Athens' rivals, seeing its success, adopted democratic forms of governments. Syracuse, for example, ended its traditional method of governance and set up a democracy that lasted 60 years. In spite of this, Athens continued to be in conflict with other states that were tyrannies or oligarchies, and the city had been forced into a bloody war with Corinth less than a generation earlier. Why is this important? Because the crowds that attended the first performances of *Antigone* were passionately committed to their novel form of government and its provocative notion that ordinary citizens were capable of self-rule. So the greater number in attendance would have rooted for Antigone in her battle with Creon, seeing her as a freedom fighter against his tyranny. That the play received a first prize in the city's annual drama contest suggests that this is so. Its tale of valiant antagonism to autocracy offered audiences a quite specific message, as they would have understood that democracies are always faced by threats from states that are averse to freedom.

FROM TODAY'S HEADLINES

This offers us yet another interpretation of the play. Think for a moment of someone like the Russian presidential candidate Alexander Navalny, who opposes Putin, or the blind Chinese lawyer Chen Guangcheng, who fights for the rights of rural peasants in the People's Republic. They are among the number of democratic politicians and human rights activists opposing cruel dictators with a perfect consciousness that their actions will not soon lead to the overthrow of the regimes they oppose—and that these courageous acts will more likely lead to their own deaths. Are they like Antigone? Are they seeking martyrdom? Or are they playing a long game, one by which they hope to inspire others? And was that Antigone's unstated purpose? This is another way to read the play.

Contemporary versions of the tale offer us something else, too. They make a literal aspect of the play into a metaphor. That's because in ancient times most cities were surrounded by walls, and the city dwellers could pull up their gates and protect their people within their solid boundaries. Thus, the Seven Gates of Thebes in the play are what Polynices and his comrades had tried to storm. Before *Antigone* begins, the barbarians have been at the gates. This is even another way in which the ancient drama possessed a directness of meaning and a relevance to its audience that, unfortunately, is partially lost in modern datings.

Regardless, what is certain is that we cannot but see Antigone as a figure of particular relevance in a time of plague and war, a moment in which hostile foreign nations are forming alliances whose cooperation is based in a mutual opposition to democracy and freedom. That is what draws Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran together, and it is what we must oppose, just as we oppose any State's undue intrusion into the rights of citizens to meet familial and religious obligations. Antigone is a symbol of this, and, shrill though she may be, she is a hero for our time. **RL**

Note: The text I have quoted from was translated by Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb in a Bantam Books paperback edition of The Complete Plays of Sophocles, edited by Moses Hadas and printed in 1967.

Jonathan Leaf is a playwright who writes frequently about the arts and culture. His debut novel, *City of Angles*, will be published in March.

THE BLACK CHURCH: A WORLD WITHIN A WORLD

by RACHEL FERGUSON



The role of the Black church in the lives of Black Americans has much to teach all American Christians—first of all, why there needed to be a “Black” church at all. But is it time to look beyond self-segregated institutions in the hope of forming one multiracial, multiethnic institution?





WHAT WE MEAN WHEN we use the word “Black” (and whether or not we capitalize it) causes constant confusion in American life. We are liable to contrast Black with white, and to treat the two terms as though they belong to the same category: race. But this is a mistake. As a matter of historical fact, Black Americans formed separate cultural institutions because they were excluded from white institutions or forced to be subordinate within them on account of the color of their skin. But those separate institutions, greatest among them the Black church, grew into unique and powerful cultural forces that shaped Black American life in ways that are both

quintessentially American and distinctively Black. As Denzel Washington says, “It’s not color; it’s culture.”

“White,” on the other hand, is a mere legal category. Culture tends to be regional; the vast majority of Black Americans hail from the southeast, while whites are found in every American region. It’s not so much that white people are punctual as that the northeastern great-great-great grandchildren of the industrializing Puritans are punctual, while people from agricultural economies the world over are more relaxed about time. It’s not at all that Black Americans are more egalitarian and whites are more hierarchical as that northeastern elites who

draw up these lists about “whiteness” are egalitarians themselves and so want to associate their own culture with minority culture. Sadly

for them, Black Americans, like most southerners, are quite hierarchical, as is evident in parenting styles, in the use of honorifics when addressing one’s elders, and in ecclesial structure. In how many white churches, one might ask, do we refer to the wife of the pastor as the First Lady?

And so, as it turns out, whiteness is not a particularly helpful category when it comes to describing a culture. Rather, the term is used in some academic circles to refer to the legal category that could, throughout much of the 20th century, afford one the fullest set of legal rights. Unsurprisingly, anyone who could make a case for themselves clamored to get into this category, including many immigrant communities that had never been thought white before.

Distinguishing the use of the term “Black” as referring to a particular slice of American culture and “white” as referring to a historical legal category helps us solve the conundrum of that common online query, “What if we said the same thing for white people?” That is, what if we had a “Buy White” day, celebrated white excellence, or had a White Student Union in our university? The fact that such questions are patently absurd proves the culture-not-race point. Black Americans are celebrating a shared historical experience, a history of cultural solidarity in the face of real oppression, and the particulars of a unique cultural legacy. While exclusion by whites provided the impetus for this cultural formation, oppression is by no means its central characteristic. That honor



Photo by Sandy Huffaker/Corbis via Getty Images

A worship service at the True Love Worship Center in Van Nuys, California in 2011

goes to something far more substantive: the Imago Dei doctrine of the Black church. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, authors of *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, call the Black church the “cultural womb” of Black America. It is this institution and this theological emphasis that gives rise to so much else, including some of the largest social organizations in the history of the United States, some of the most globally influential music in the history of the world, and one of the most ethically sophisticated political movements in all of history. In spite of the decline of all church attendance across the United States, an overwhelming majority of Black Americans today identify as Christians, and they are the most likely demographic group to say they believe in God, pray, and read the Bible.

We need the Black church. All of us. We ought to be celebrating it, learning its history, and bringing its legacy to bear for current struggles, both in the church and in our common life together as Americans.

WHY THE BLACK CHURCH?

Having grown up in a multiethnic church with a Black pastor whose background was in the Black church, I assumed that I had a passing familiarity with this tradition. But after doing the research for the chapter

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on the Black church in *Black Liberation Through the Marketplace*, I realized I was far more ignorant than I had suspected. I had assumed, for instance, that Black enslaved people became Christians through the efforts of slaveholders, but this is almost completely false. Some of the enslaved were already Christians, as we see with the Stono Rebellion of Portuguese-speaking Catholics in South Carolina in 1739. Many southern planters were fairly unchurched Anglicans who knew just enough Bible to know that Christian slaves could make a compelling biblical case for their freedom based on various warnings to the Hebrews never to enslave one's brothers and sisters. The planters were right about that, by the way; this is exactly what the enslaved argued after conversion! Rather than being evangelized by their slaveholders, some of the enslaved converted at the tent meetings of evangelical revivalists, and they went on to evangelize one another when they returned to the plantation. As a result, the historical Black church is Baptist and Methodist, as these groups made up the majority of revivalists. (Pentecostalism doesn't arise until the early 20th century and began as an interracial movement.)

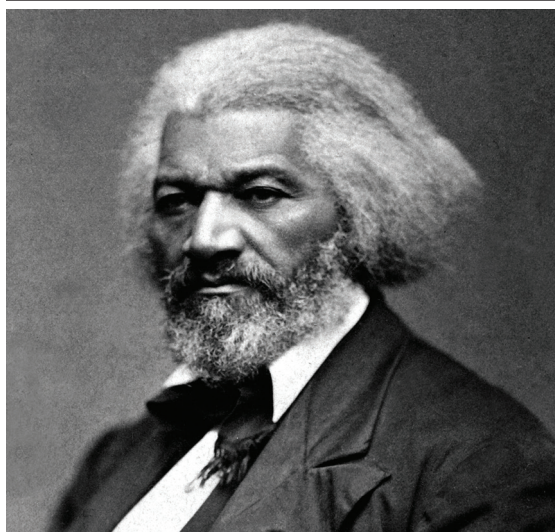
Slaveholders were often furious, beating zealous new converts for praying with and preaching to one another. When white plantation missionaries came to preach to the enslaved, their every word was vetted by the masters, so that their preaching consisted of warnings against theft and disobedience with nary a word about Jesus Christ. They brought with them religious pamphlets full of pictures of white Jesus,

white Moses, and white Paul, too. This, and not Christianity in general, was the genesis of the phrase "white man's religion." The enslaved were referring quite literally to the preaching of a false gospel of obedience to whites. In contrast, their own secret, nighttime gatherings of worship in "hush harbors" elevated their status as children of God, their joy in the belief that Christ died for them, and their aspiration for the same freedom that the God of Israel had provided to the ancient Hebrews. It was from these early meetings of the Black church that the tradition of the spirituals emerged, with their explicit celebration of spiritual freedom hiding the implicit longing for physical freedom. Frederick Douglass' account of his own conversion in his second autobiography is representative. Evangelized and discipled by his dear friend Uncle Lawson, he was ecstatic at the thought of salvation by Jesus and wanted nothing more than to spread the good news. He and Uncle Lawson prayed for and believed that he would someday be free. He was actively persecuted for his faith by his slaveholder, and he contrasted his own spiritual formation with the flaccid teaching that he overheard from his mistress's pastor.

In *Slave Religion*, Albert Raboteau argues that the growth of the Black church in secret became the central source of self-esteem for enslaved Black people. It gave them the dreams of freedom that inspired them to take hold of it when the chance finally came. It gave them the intense desire to learn that catapulted their literacy rates from near-zero at emancipation to 80% in 1930. The Black church created a space within which Black people's leadership mattered, not just to one another, but to God Himself. Their persecution by their slaveholders for their religious faith aligned them with the martyrs of Acts and placed some of them among the "great cloud of witnesses" attested to by Paul.

It's worth mentioning that the Black church is almost certainly also the genesis of the term "Black joy," which never ceases to puzzle white people unfamiliar with this history. The revivalists noted immediately that while white converts would wail and moan over their sin, Black converts, though also grieved by their own sin, were more likely to respond with ecstatic joy, leaping and shouting, praising God. It may be hard to convey what an effusion of intense joy came over those who were just then learning that the God of the universe made them in his own image; that God loved them so dearly that he would take on flesh and die for them; and that they would rule with

Frederick Douglass (c. 1817–1895)



him in eternity, even judging angels! Those who had been told again and again that they were not even worthy of freedom or citizenship were now being told that they were worthy of the status of children of God and citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. The revivalists welcomed their enthusiasm, and many Baptists and Methodists initially accepted Black believers as equal members of the church before the intractability of the slave system wore down their lofty principles.

THE BLACK CHURCH AS CRADLE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

One can imagine the images, the theological emphases, and the hymn lyrics that might suffuse all white-produced materials for churches, even those with a significant number of Black Christians sitting in pews. Were these materials affirming the dignity of Black people? Were they reflecting the artistic contributions of Black musicians or the insights of Black preachers? Almost certainly not. Enter Richard Henry Boyd.

Born Dick Gray, after his slaveholder, Richard Henry Boyd supported his slaveholder and his slaveholder's sons in the Civil War. He managed their farm and cotton sales for a time after the war but also changed his name and learned to read. Like so many other formerly enslaved people, Boyd rushed to marry and to officially join a Black church in the late 1860s, privileges that had been denied to the slave population until then. He became a Baptist minister soon after and led congregations throughout Texas. Boyd organized the Texas Negro Baptist Convention as well as several new Black Baptist churches while also taking advantage of the opportunity to purchase cheap land in the area. While doing so, he noticed that Sunday school material, as well as the curricula provided for the Freedmen's schools throughout the south, were entirely written and published by whites. The organizations doing the publishing—the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the American Baptist Publishing Society—had been anti-slavery, so not all Black Baptists were as animated as Boyd about starting separate publishing ventures. But Boyd was sure that the materials wouldn't serve Black children well. After reaching an agreement with the Southern Baptist Convention, he convinced several important Black Baptist organizations to buy their materials exclusively from him. All this was fairly controversial, as it caused a major power shift away from the American Baptist Publishing Society,



Richard Henry Boyd (1843–1922)

“
BOYD WENT ON TO PROMOTE BLACK CREATORS OF ALL KINDS THROUGH HIS NEW PUBLISHING COMPANY, IN WAYS THAT INDIRECTLY SHAPED THE POPULAR RISE OF BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC.
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with some even accusing Boyd of arranging things merely to further his own business interests.

Upsetting a church publishing duopoly sounds nefarious enough unless we reflect on the fact that the overarching white religious body published only white authors, white musicians, and white Sunday school material. Once again, this isn't primarily

DOLLS, DOLLS NEGRO DOLLS



An Opportunity is Given to Every Negro Family to Secure a Beautiful Negro Doll for Their Girls.

An exhibit of these dolls is now at the Nashville Globe Office. The public is invited to call at the Globe office and see these dolls, and get the prices on the same. There are four sizes. The most beautiful collection that has ever been seen in Nashville.

The fact that the Colored Dolls have reached this city, and that hundreds of families will get them in their homes within the next three months is true beyond a doubt. Take your child to the Globe office in the Odd Fellows' Hall Building, 447 Fourth Avenue, North, (North Cherry) and see these beautiful toys. There will be a clerk in the Globe office who will give full information concerning these dolls. Those who can not get to the Globe Office will be given an opportunity to see the same assortment of dolls by calling at the National Baptist Publishing Board, 523 Second Avenue, North, (North Market). They will be given the same exhibition with full information.

Orders for these dolls should be placed at once, as they must be shipped from the factory. Do you want one for your child? If so, call at either of the two above named places. If you can not call, write for prices and pictures to the

NEGRO DOLL COMPANY
523 Second Avenue, North, or 447 Fourth Avenue, North, Nashville, Tenn.

These toys are not made of that disgraceful and humiliating type that we have been accustomed to seeing black dolls made of. They represent the intelligent and refined Negro of to-day, rather than that type of toy that is usually given to the children, and as a rule used as a scarecrow. These toys are placed in the city and at the disposal of the people that they may teach their children how to look upon their people.



For Further Information
Call on the

NATIONAL BAPTIST PUBLISHING BOARD,
523 SECOND AVENUE, NORTH,
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE.

A 1908 advertisement in the *Nashville Globe* for the Negro Doll Company

about the color of anyone's skin, but about Black culture formation through the Black church. What Boyd found objectionable was the way that white publications failed to serve the needs of Black families and children in Black churches. So Baptist church materials were in a very real sense shutting out Black Baptist contributions. The secondary effect of this was that Black creators were shut out of any economic benefit in providing these materials as well. So the problem was both cultural and economic in nature. And it should be noted that Boyd, in true Booker T. Washington fashion, went on to promote Black creators of all kinds through his new publishing company, in ways that indirectly shaped the popular rise, for instance, of Black gospel music.

Nevertheless, Boyd's choice to break away was highly controversial even within his own community, reflecting a philosophical debate between Black Christian separationists and other Black Christians who thought that these sorts of group-focused

efforts were merely a distraction from the main work of the church, namely, evangelization. But the term "separationist" probably sounds more militant than it really was. Those Black Christians who felt the need to build specifically Black institutions for Black people still saw white Christians as true brothers and sisters in Christ and were often happy to ally Black institutions with white ones when it made sense to do so. It was less about a principled commitment to separation as much as it was about carving out space for their own culture and culture makers in a white-dominated world that wasn't quick to include or promote them. It was the best response to an unideal situation.

In a parallel way, Boyd objected to white-manufactured Black dolls, not because they were made by white companies, but because they were of "that disgraceful and humiliating type" that children responded to by using them as "a scarecrow." Boyd launched the National Negro Doll Company in 1911.

even between separationist groups and cooperationist groups, in their mission efforts. In 1895 they finally joined together to form the National Baptist Convention, reaching 2.2 million members by 1906. Consider that, in 1905, the membership of the white Southern Baptist Convention was 1.9 million, and this was at a time when the Black share of the United States population was several percentage points lower than the current 13%. Indeed, Black Baptists prided themselves on their unity, contrasting themselves with white Baptists who had split over slavery.

Today the NBC boasts 8 million members and is second in size only to the Southern Baptist Convention (at 14 million members) among all American denominations. Alas, disputes over Boyd's control of the ever more influential National Baptist Publishing Board led to his ultimate split with the NBC, to form the National Baptist Convention of America, sometimes referred to as "Boyd's Convention." After all, by 1906 the NBPB was the largest Black publishing company in the United States. It was the first to publish the old Negro spirituals and played a seminal role in the popularization of Black gospel music through the

publication of *Golden Gems* and *The National Baptist Hymnal*. Though never rising to the numbers of its parent, the NBCA today boasts 3.1 million members. For comparison, the American Baptists (formerly known as the Northern Baptist Convention) boasts only 1.3 million members.

As W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out, Black churches are "curiously composite institutions, which combine the work of churches, theaters, newspapers, homes, schools and lodges." In Kenneth Clark's interview with James Baldwin, Baldwin explains the way his parents' loyalty to the church was typical of that generation: Their "relationship to the church was very direct because it was the only means they had of expressing their pain and their despair." That meant that Black church organizations had a deep personal relevance, and therefore a solidarity, that could out-compete the white church in certain ways. Kidd cites an account of the Black church in Virginia: "There was not an evening or afternoon that had not its meetings, its literary or social gatherings, its picnic or fair for the benefit of the church, its Dorcas society, or some occasion of religious sociability."

A 1950 gospel choir



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The fulfillment of overlapping social needs in church extended to political organization as well. With so much social capital flowing out of the church, it's no wonder that Black Americans report higher rates of religiosity and genuine belief than their white counterparts, and that Black denominations have remained relatively unified. We should also note that the United States is an unusually religious place all around, at least in comparison to other economically developed nations. This may very well be due, in part, to the deep commitment of its minority communities to their religious heritage.

While white Christians—both theologically progressive and conservative—often associate racial or ethnic consciousness with theological liberalism, Boyd's NBKA has maintained a stringently orthodox faith, maintaining male-only ordination and traditional Christian sexual ethics. Even more fascinating, they have pursued ongoing racial reconciliation efforts through cooperative endeavors with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptists. White Americans, whether on the left or the right, may be too liable to assume that Black racial consciousness among Christians is some kind of absolute philosophical commitment. A deeper grasp of American history shows that Black Christians

always desired the fullness of spiritual sibling-hood with their white brothers and sisters. The denial of such came from the white church, causing some Black Christians to protect their own spiritual well-being by creating separate institutions. That practical choice organically led to the formation of distinct religio-cultural practices. The hope of reconciliation, however, never died. How does it stand today?

#LEAVELOUD

Many predominantly white denominations embraced racial reconciliation efforts in the 1990s, seeing such actions as a basic correction of past injustice and harm, with some of the most conservative movements of the time, including the Promise Keepers, the Presbyterian Church of America, and the Southern Baptist Convention, getting on board. Denominational statements were published, both apologizing for past racial oppression and exclusion and committing to racial healing. Nevertheless, many have soured on such efforts recently in ways that remind us of the separationist/cooperationist debates of more than a century ago. While the most enthusiastic reconcilers formed multiethnic churches, this approach raises the question of how to think about those historical institutions that were formed as an important haven for Black people. (The same could be said for immigrant churches.) Are these institutions now to break apart so that their members can be scattered among the more predominant white churches in order to make them diverse? Perhaps the phrasing of that question is a giveaway; after all, why shouldn't white people go to ethnic churches to pursue racial reconciliation? If that sounds absurd, it's no more absurd than asking Black and immigrant Christians to participate in forms of worship and cultural practices that are foreign to them.

Ultimately, the greatest complaint from Black Christians about multiethnic churches is that they too often devolve into white churches with a smattering of other people in attendance but with white people in charge. It's difficult for members of the majority culture to imagine subordinating the way they do worship or preaching to a minority leader. My own church is multiethnic, and great things are happening there, but the leadership is majority Black. As Black people are only 13% of the population, most white people won't be able to have this experience.

The complaint about tokenism in the multiethnic church movement recently led to the #LeaveLoud



A display of books on critical race theory at the University of Wisconsin–Madison

campaign run by Jemar Tisby's The Witness. Tisby came to the conclusion that white Christians weren't going to humbly listen to and learn from Black leaders in multiethnic churches, so it was better simply to go. Similarly, Black Baptist pastor Charlie Dates had joined the Southern Baptist Convention in great hope after their MLK50 conference in 2018 celebrating the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. Older members had warned him against this decision, but he assured them that their fears were based on "the old Southern Baptists" and that a new day was dawning. Only a few years later, he felt that he had to admit to them that he had been wrong. SBC leaders argued that the only moral thing to do was to vote for Trump, and six SBC seminary heads chose the closing of 2020—the year of George Floyd—to declare that critical race theory was unbiblical and not allowed in their schools. Since writers associated with CRT seemed to be the only well-known scholars doing the historical digging on de jure and de facto segregation, the SBC had passed a resolution declaring that, while the philosophical

underpinnings of CRT were objectionable, it was still possible to learn something from its scholars. But this resolution was later overturned because of opposition from an ultra-conservative faction that failed to grasp that the secular, intersectional association of racial issues with unorthodox views on sex and gender did not align with the vast majority of Black churches. The American Black church has always been awake to issues of genuine racial oppression while maintaining a high view of scripture and deeply traditional understandings of maleness, femaleness, and marriage. Since the Black church has never quite fit into our political binary, the protesting faction assumed that interest in the racial history work from some academics was a slippery slope into affirmation of homosexual acts and transgenderism. The failure to appreciate the uniqueness of the Black American blend of values and concerns is endemic.

I am neither a fan of Tisby's alliance with third-wave anti-racism nor of critical race theory, and yet I can understand Tisby's and Dates' frustration. If

the response of white Baptists was to reject critical pedagogy but actively replace it with another account of historical Black oppression, white members could presumably overlap significantly with Black members, even if they maintained different political leanings on secondary matters such as economic policy. Rather than retreating from the conversation about America's history of racial oppression, conservatives could contribute to that conversation by highlighting the role of the state in socially engineering segregation, attacking Black property and contract rights, and undermining Black economic advancement through well-meaning but foolish policies. While one often hears the refrain from conservatives that, *of course* we should teach the lamentable elements of our history along with the good, one has rarely seen conservatives commit real time and effort to this task. In the midst of their own retreat from the historical work, they complain that the left controls the narrative. The statement of the seminary heads, particularly given its timing, felt like pandering to the ultra-conservative wing rather than prioritizing racial reconciliation efforts.

But perhaps more relevant to the question of racial reconciliation is whether multiethnic churches were ever the solution. There's certainly nothing wrong with having such a church, but it may be asking too much to artificially push people in the direction of such projects. After all, the ethnic diversity and spiritual unity displayed in Revelations 7 are promised in the kingdom of God, when all our disparate songs will miraculously blend in perfect harmony. Until then, however, maintaining cultural distinctives through separate institutions may simply be part and parcel of thick civil society institutions, including the church. The desire to somehow reconcile them all in one worship service may simply lead to the poor execution of good traditions in music, preaching, and liturgy. It may constitute a denial of our embodiment, which limits us to this place, this culture, and this tradition. None of these claims denies the possibility of sweet partnerships between churches of different ethnicities, and these could facilitate mutual understanding and racial reconciliation without watering down the particular practices that have meant so much to the process of spiritual formation in a given tradition. Is this separatism or just cultural preservation?

Like minister and entrepreneur Richard Henry Boyd, I think Christians should build the institutions they need to edify the communities they are in, while

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maintaining hearts full of hope and openness to all other Christian believers. Organic, multiethnic churches will certainly emerge as our neighborhoods become more diverse. For those who choose to remain in the historical havens of Black and immigrant churches, partnerships with majority-culture churches can help us to move ever closer to that beautiful picture of worship that our Lord himself revealed to John:

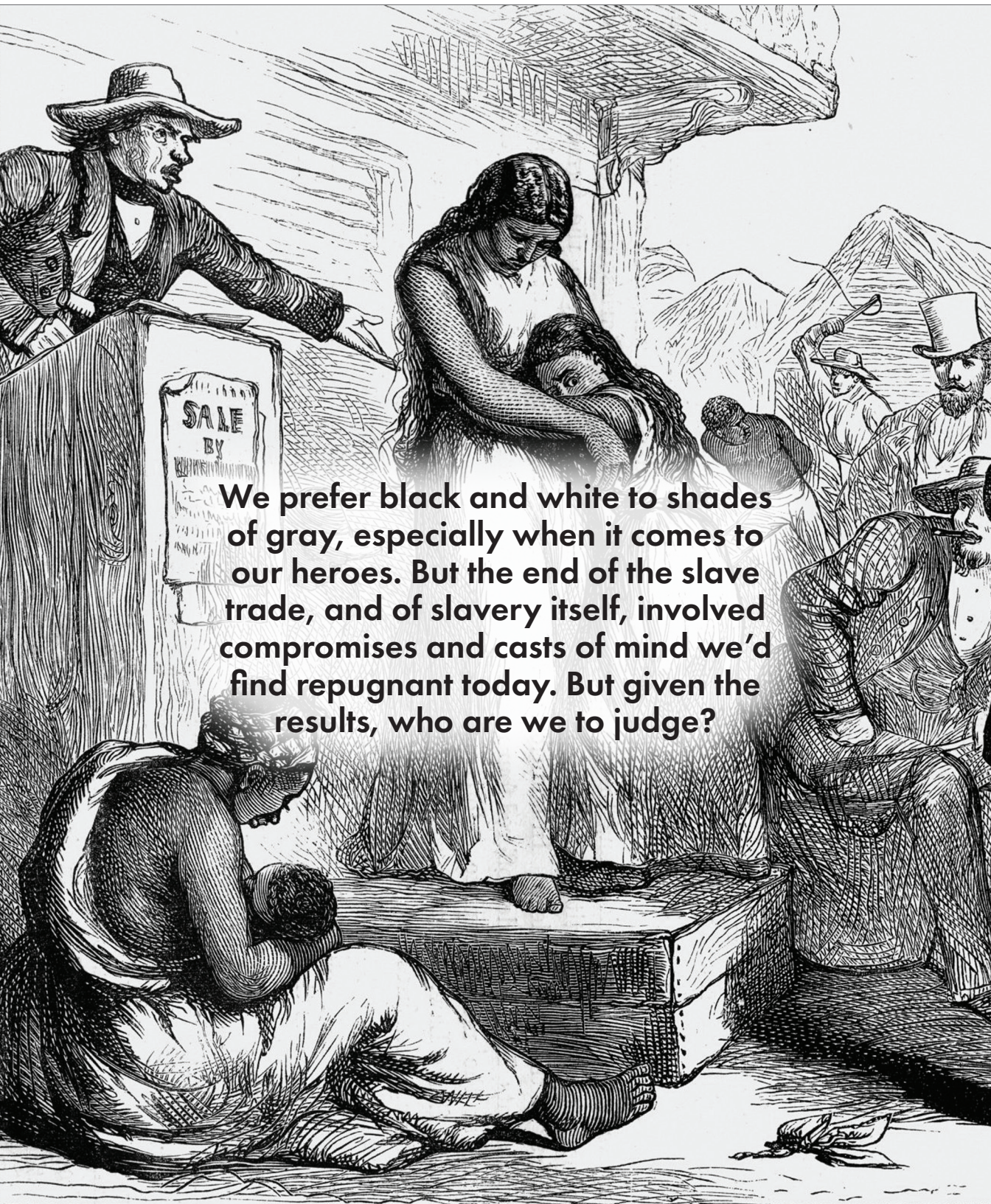
After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” **RL**

Rachel Ferguson received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Saint Louis University and is director of the Center for Free Enterprise and assistant dean and professor of business ethics in the College of Business at Concordia University Chicago. She is the coauthor, with Marcus M. Witcher, of *Black Liberation Through the Marketplace: Hope, Heartbreak, and the Promise of America*. Ferguson is also a board member for the Freedom Center of Missouri, Faith Ascent Ministries, and LOVEtheLOU, as well as an affiliate scholar for the Acton Institute.



HEROES AND MONSTERS: BRITISH ABOLITION AND THE ART OF COMPROMISE

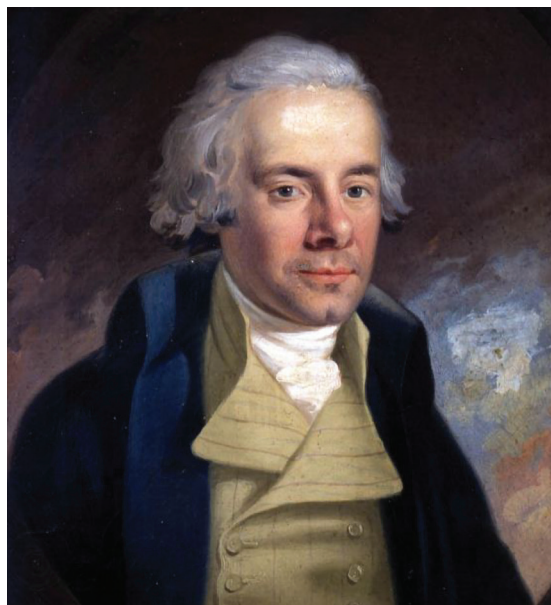
by ALEC RYRIE



We prefer black and white to shades of gray, especially when it comes to our heroes. But the end of the slave trade, and of slavery itself, involved compromises and casts of mind we'd find repugnant today. But given the results, who are we to judge?

I

IT MAY BE the most decisive and complete victory in any moral argument in human history. European and North American elites had, for centuries, deliberately ignored the ethics of the Atlantic slave trade, or justified it as a regrettable necessity, or simply accepted it as a vast fact of life that could not be wished away. Suddenly, in the 1780s, a previously eccentric and extreme view—that the trade ought to be abolished—won a mass following in both Britain and the newly independent United States. In 1807 both countries legislated to abolish the trade, and over the following decades the other European imperial powers were cajoled or coerced into following suit.



William Wilberforce (1759–1833)

The righteousness of this cause is now so utterly self-evident that the subject is hard to see clearly. We now remember the Atlantic slave trade as an exceptional horror, standing alongside the 20th-century genocides as one of the greatest crimes in human history. Surely only a monster would defend, excuse, or minimize it; surely those who brought it to an end must be heroes.

But while stories populated by monsters and heroes are very comforting, they are not good history. We use such stories to sing ourselves songs we already know and love, but we don't learn anything from them, and we end up reducing people in the past to bit parts in dramas we have scripted for them. We don't need to abandon our own hard-won moral insights to recognize that our 18th-century forebears didn't see this issue in quite the way we do.

So, what are we to make of the traditional heroes of slave-trade abolition? William Wilberforce, the English evangelical politician and bon vivant, is the best known of the so-called Clapham Sect of aristocratic evangelicals who campaigned for a series of moral reforms. Wilberforce took the demand for slave-trade abolition into Parliament in the 1780s, kept the cause stubbornly alive during the hard years of the 1790s, and finally spotted and seized the moment in 1807, when the British establishment could be persuaded to do the right thing. His moral revulsion at the slave trade was unmistakable. But

this is also the man who wrote, in the very year the trade was abolished, that slavery itself ought to continue for a while yet. “Our poor degraded Negro Slaves are as yet incapable” of enjoying freedom, he reckoned: “to grant it to them immediately, would be to insure not only their masters’ ruin, but their own.” Hero—or monster?

Naturally, what we do with people like Wilberforce is to conscript them as cannon fodder in the culture wars. One side finds that a white evangelical who campaigned against slavery provides very welcome political cover and essentializes his admirable qualities while downplaying, contextualizing, and excusing his shortcomings. The other side detects a classic white-savior narrative, in which helpless Black people are rescued by the intervention of a kindly white man, reduced to nonspeaking parts in their own story, and expected to be grateful for the judicious recommendation that they endure a few more decades’ enslavement.

If you want to make one or other of those arguments, feel free to stop reading now and to fire up your phone. But the story of how and why some white Europeans and Americans came to this moral awakening; of why this happened when it did, and not before; and why it was real, but partial—this story has more to offer us than heroes and monsters. As our own age wrestles with moral dilemmas that might seem divisive and intractable to us but intolerably clear to our descendants, we could have something to learn from them.

DELIVERANCE FROM “PAGAN DARKNESS”

Why did Wilberforce and his friends in the Clapham Sect oppose the slave trade? It is hard even for us to ask the question, as the evil they were opposing seems so self-evident. Violently abducting millions of people from their homes; shipping them across the Atlantic in conditions so nightmarish that a sixth or more of them died en route; condemning the survivors and their descendants to a perpetual and irredeemable enslavement in which they were generally denied the most basic of human dignities. Surely we do not need to explain why any human being should be appalled by such things?

Yet people generally prefer not to see horrors. Before the sudden awakening of the 1780s, most of the good Christian people of Europe and the Americas had been at least dimly aware of the slave

trade for centuries, and few of them had done much about it. From the start there was a widespread sense that there was something not entirely right about the whole business. In a series of British colonies, from Providence Island in the Caribbean to Georgia on the American mainland, the first founders tried to exclude slavery. But, repeatedly, they failed. Running a successful New World colony in the 17th and 18th centuries without slavery was like running a modern economy without oil: conceivable, desirable, but no one has actually managed to do it.

Atlantic slavery had plenty of white critics, but their criticisms don’t line up neatly with modern perspectives. True, a few voices always insisted that enslavement was no more than institutionalized kidnap and murder. That point was made forcefully by the Massachusetts judge Samuel Sewall in a seminal anti-slavery tract in 1700. Yet Sewall also argued that filling New England with Black pagans was undesirable. Even if they were set free, he lamented, “They can seldom use their freedom well,” and “there is such a disparity in their Conditions, Colour & Hair, that they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families.” Instead, they would “remain in our Body Politic as a kind of extravasate Blood.” Others worried that slavery would, as one opponent of allowing slavery in Georgia argued, “be very Mischievous...to the poor white labouring people.” It is, after all, hard to compete with unpaid laborers who can literally be worked to death. The most widely voiced ethical criticism of slavery was that, since slaves were unable to solemnize marriages, slaveholders were (as Sewall put it) tempted “to connive at the Fornication of their Slaves.” Consciences

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that could swallow enslavement itself revolted at the irregular liaisons it brought in its wake.

As that implies, the principal Christian critique of slavery before the 1780s was not of the institution itself, but its spiritual effects. When Bishop Gibson of London wrote an open letter to slaveholders in the British Empire in 1727, his subject was “delivering those poor Creatures from the Pagan Darkness and Superstition in which they were bred,” not setting them free. In fact, like many others, he insisted at length that a Christian slave would be a contented, obedient, honest, and hard-working slave. Ideally, the whole distasteful business of shipping Africans across the ocean could be redeemed by paternalistic care for their bodies and Christian ministry to their souls.

The hollowness of Gibson’s call was exposed by a Caribbean Anglican priest, Robert Robertson, who in a brutally honest rebuttal explained that a reformed or Christianized slave system was impossible. Robertson robustly defended enslaving Africans, whom he despised for their “Dulness, Defects, Corruptions, and Perverseness.” But he would have none of Gibson’s fairy tales. These, he reminded his readers, were people ripped from their homes, nearly half of whom died in their first year in the Caribbean; the rest were (and, he insisted, must be) kept in conditions of squalor and degradation. If people in Europe truly knew “the Nature and Circumstances of this abstruse *uncouth* Trade ... the Millions of Lives

it destroys,” they might, he admitted, want to abolish it—but such a thing was impossible. If one country did so, the others would swarm in like vultures. He saved his contempt, however, for the do-gooders in England who deluded themselves that slavery could “have Christianity grafted onto it.” “Any Man ... who knows what Christianity is, and what *this* Slavery is,” would know that a “Christian-Slave” is as impossible “as *God-Mammon, or Christ-Belial*.”

Robertson truly was a monster, but he was at least a clear-sighted one, able to name the evils around him even as he refused to oppose them; few of us can say as much. And he stands as a terrible witness against his generation. As early as 1730, the brute facts of the slave trade were published openly for whoever wanted to see them. It is true that most Euro-American whites remained blind to those facts for another 50 years, but that is because—like most of us when confronted with dreadful and intractable evils—they chose not to see.

AFRICAN AGENCY AND REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR

And yet, half a century later, Wilberforce and his allies were able to mount a campaign to abolish the slave trade, which, in its first flush in the late 1780s, secured signatures for a petition from over a tenth of Britain’s entire population, and a thumping majority in the House of Commons in 1792. The bill was then blocked in the House of Lords, and the political winds turned against it, but 15 years later it was finally enacted. It is an exemplary case of transformative moral and political change.

The cause did not properly come to Wilberforce’s attention until 1787, although other members of the “Clapham Sect,” notably Granville Sharp, were some of the way ahead of him. Abolitionism had begun in a few minority ghettos—Quakers, some Methodists, a handful of freethinkers. Some lawyers took up the cause, and while the 1772 ruling that England was “free soil” freed but one solitary slave, James Somerset, it also gave notice that the English establishment’s consciences might be stirring in their sleep.

A vital part in awakening them was played by Africans themselves, a tiny but highly visible minority in English society. The most famous African voice raised against the slave trade was that of Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiographical *Interesting Narrative* (1789) delivered many times over on its title’s modest promise: After being kidnapped and enslaved

The official medallion of the British Anti-Slavery Society (1795)





Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797)

aboard a naval ship, Equiano was freed, reenslaved and shipped to the West Indies; he bought his freedom and traveled as far as Central America and the Arctic before finally settling in London. His gripping adventures and his disarming literary style made the injustice of what he had endured inescapable.

A less heroic but more telling case was that of Philip Quaque, the first African to be ordained in the Church of England, having been shipped to London for education as a child. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel sent him to his homeland as a missionary, based in a slave-trading fortress. It was an impossible role. “The vicious practice of purchasing flesh and blood like oxen,” Quaque told American friends, made Christian ministry futile. Quite apart from what it did to “my poor abject Countrymen ... whom you without the Bowels of Christian Love and



Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to Foreign Parts

Pity, hold in cruel Bondage,” it corrupted the morals of the white traders so profoundly that he could not minister to them either. When he described the obstacles his mission faced for his correspondents in London, he was blunt: “principally the horrid Slave Trade.” As Robertson had observed a generation earlier: Working within, ameliorating, or reforming this system was not an option.

That realization was slowly gathering pace across the middle of the century, as wishful thinking and self-deception were worn down by bitter experience. But what truly brought the matter to the fore was the American Revolution, which created abolitionism as we know it, in three quite distinct ways.

First, most famously but perhaps least importantly, its ideals of liberty were obviously applicable to slavery. Notoriously, many American Patriots refused to draw that conclusion. But it is true that the abolition of slavery in the northern states, and the clause in the 1787 Constitution that (eventually) empowered the federal government to ban the foreign slave trade, could not have happened without the Revolution as an ideological accelerant. It is no coincidence that the briefly independent republic of Vermont had, in



J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840) depicting the 1781 massacre of African slaves on the British slaver ship *Zong*

1777, the world's first constitution prohibiting slavery. True, the abolitionist wave that swept across the North was too weak to reach south of Philadelphia. But had Britain and the colonies managed to resolve their differences peacefully, American abolitionism would have been feeble indeed.

More importantly, American independence transformed the question of slavery in what remained of the British Empire. As long as there were American colonies to be placated, no British government would risk irritating slaveholders. But now the South's slaveholders were someone else's problem. The handful of planters on the Caribbean islands, vastly outnumbered by the enslaved population, were in no position to dictate terms to London. The slaveholding lobby in the British Parliament was suddenly flimsy. A united British-American empire would not, could not, have abolished the slave trade.

Most of all, American independence provided Britain with a motive as well as an opportunity. The shattering, unimaginable defeat in the New World felt like divine judgment for a national sin. But what sin? At the start of the American war, a few siren

voices, such as John Wesley's, had warned that God would punish Britain's empire of slavery with defeat. That prospect seemed laughably unlikely, but in retrospect perhaps they were right. A scandal like the *Zong* case—in which 131 enslaved men and women were deliberately drowned in pursuit of a fraudulent insurance claim—would not have had the same cut-through to British readers had it not come to court in 1783, the year that a stunned Britain was forced to accept that the American war was lost. It was also the year the first really commercially successful anti-slavery pamphlet, *The Case of our Fellow-Creatures, the Oppressed Africans*, was published. It cited the Bible's warning that "the Righteous Judge of the whole earth chastiseth nations for their sins."

It was this live fear of divine judgment that gave urgency to abolitionism, which began to seem a matter of immediate self-defense. Every hurricane in the West Indies now looked like a portent of doom. Bristol and Liverpool would be judged like Tyre and Sidon before them. Terrible warnings of national guilt and imminent judgment were a mainstay of Wilberforce's speechmaking, the more so as, from

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AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE TRANSFORMED THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY IN WHAT REMAINED OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE.

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1792, Britain embarked on a new, existential war with revolutionary France. If God was using the atheist revolutionaries to chastise his sinful people in Britain, what sin could be greater than the slave trade?

Late to the abolitionist party as they were, Wilberforce and his friends brought something indispensable to it: respectability. The “Clapham Sect” is a later nickname for his south London coterie: Contemporaries called them “the saints,” with a note of mockery. But these were no pious eccentrics. The group included half a dozen MPs, prominent Anglican clergymen, at least one leading lawyer, and, later, the governor-general of Bengal. They had friends everywhere and they knew how to use them. Wilberforce’s own saintliness is undoubted, but so is his appetite for and ease with high politics. He was the kind of evangelical whose diary reveals him solemnly pledging, as a pious discipline, never to drink more than six glasses of wine a day. He believed that a Christian should combine seriousness with sociability and was known to be scintillating company. He tried hard to restrain his knack for biting sarcasm, not with total success.

The Claphamites’ antislavery campaign is a master class in the political power of high principle, tactical cunning, and bloody-minded persistence. Wilberforce in particular was one of history’s great badgerers. One ally described him as “the most damned intractable fellow with whom I ever had to deal.” Grinding the cause forward inch by inch, they accepted tactical victories, allies of convenience, and fair-weather friends. And in 1807, when the moral, commercial, military, and party-political stars were all, for a moment, aligned, they spotted their opportunity and pounced.

FREEING BODIES TO SAVE SOULS

Abolishing the British slave trade was never an end in itself for Wilberforce and his friends. It was both a stepping stone to greater aims and part of a wider constellation of causes, and unless we understand that dual context, we will not understand their achievements.

Naturally those greater aims included suppressing other nations’ slave trading. If abolitionism sprouted from a British defeat in the American Revolution, it flowered thanks to a British victory. After the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, Britain could use its mastery over the Atlantic to bribe and bully other slave-trading powers, one by one, into compliance. But while we might imagine slave-trade abolition would be a springboard for abolishing slavery outright, most of Wilberforce’s allies shared his hesitancy. This was not a modern human rights campaign, freeing the enslaved to be the sovereign individuals of liberalism. The point was to free them to be what God had created them to be, which was not simply a matter of unlocking shackles.

Quaque’s observation—that slavery was the greatest obstacle to saving Africans’ souls—was at the heart of the abolitionist cause. Bishop Gibson’s generation had tried to bring Africans to Christ by working with and through the slave system. The effort was abandoned, not because it was immoral, but because it wasn’t working. By the 1780s, the consensus was that a Christian culture could not be built on slave plantations as long as a majority of the enslaved were adult captives: too old to be formed in Christianity and unlikely ever to have a solid command of English. But—so the argument went—if slaveholders were forced to work with the people they already had rather than importing more, they would learn to be more careful with human lives. In addition, the enslaved children they raised on their plantations could be made both civilized and Christian, inheriting a spiritual freedom that (it was axiomatic) mattered far more than the bodily kind.

We can see this most clearly when we look at the Clapham saints’ abolitionism in the context of their other moral projects. They defended the worldly interests of the helpless but did so for spiritual reasons. Their campaigns do not quite mesh with modern moral priorities. Missionary work was a key concern: Several of them were founding members of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The troubled resettlement colony of Sierra Leone, founded as an African refuge for former slaves, was very much a Clapham project, and one of the saints, Zachary Macaulay, was its first

governor. Closer to home, reforming the exemplary cruelties of English criminal justice was a persistent concern; but so too was the work of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded by Wilberforce in 1787, dedicated to opposing such evils as Sabbath breaking, profanity, the “publication of blasphemous, licentious and obscene books and prints,” gambling, prostitution, and cruelty to animals. As those paternalistic priorities might imply, civil liberties and freedom of speech were not among their priorities: Wilberforce strongly supported the crackdown on political radicalism in the 1790s enforced by his good friend William Pitt, Britain’s prime minister. Hannah More, the most prominent woman among the Claphamites, was a passionate opponent of the slave trade and a supporter of girls’ education, but she vehemently opposed Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminism. When the Royal Society of Literature naively made her an honorary member, she refused, believing that no woman should be so elected. She insisted that the schools for poor girls she founded would teach them to read, not to write. The purpose of education was to inculcate godliness—a concern she shared with another Claphamite, Henry Thornton, a pioneer of schooling for the deaf.

As to Wilberforce himself, he made clear that his political life was dominated by two great moral causes: the slave trade and Christian missions in India, which the British East India Company regarded as bad for business and consistently blocked. “Next to the Slave Trade,” Wilberforce wrote in 1806, “I have long thought our making no effort to introduce the Blessings of religious and moral improvement among our subjects in the East, the greatest of our National crimes.” A door had finally opened for this cause: another of the Clapham saints, Charles Grant, had been elected as the East India Company’s chairman the previous year. When the Company’s charter was up for renewal in Parliament in 1813,

1835 illustration of freed slaves arriving in Sierra Leone



Hannah More (1745–1833)

Wilberforce and Grant spearheaded a formidable campaign that resulted not only in much increased scope for Christian missionaries in India but also for the Company’s acceptance of “religious and moral improvement” as one of its objectives.

By “moral improvement,” the Claphamites meant specific practices that revolted their Christian consciences—for example, in India, the caste system, infanticide, and above all *sati*, the occasional Hindu practice of killing widows by burning or burial, which in pious British eyes became a symbol of all that was barbaric about India. It was because of practices such as these that Wilberforce argued in 1813 that Hinduism was “one grand abomination,” a religion that was “mean, licentious and cruel,” whereas Christianity was “sublime, pure and beneficent.” Hence “religious and moral improvement” really were one thing. Indians needed to be freed from a spiritual captivity just as cruel as the bodily captivity of enslaved Africans, and in both cases it was Christianity that would do it.

From our 21st-century vantage point, there are two obvious perspectives available on this attitude. We can admire its moral clarity, its readiness to speak out against oppression regardless of cultural context or commercial interest, and its enthusiasm to give the greatest gifts of which it knew to the people who needed them most. Or we can lament its (to us) jaw-dropping lack of cultural and intellectual humility, its conviction that barbaric peoples needed to be saved from who they were, and its unquestioned imperial assumption that it was the right and the responsibility of the British to do it. But, mercifully, it is not *our* responsibility to sit in judgment over the consciences of the dead. We can simply admit that both perspectives are true.

ECCENTRIC CAUSES CAN BE WON

What do these far-off struggles have to say to those pursuing urgent moral causes in our own times? There are some practical encouragements and warnings. Eccentric, niche causes, far outside the consensus, can triumph in the end, with patience, persistence, and cunning. Moments can be seized: During times of flux, ideas that had once seemed outlandish can become truisms with startling speed. Entrenched views—such as the belief that slavery could be Christianized—can last a long time in defiance of evidence and of experience, but not forever; even the most wishful of thinkers tire of beating their heads against brick walls in the end. Clearly defined and achievable intermediate aims are much more likely to pave the way to eventual success than simply striking out heroically for the horizon. Broad coalitions can achieve things that narrow campaign groups cannot, and purity tests only serve a campaign's opponents. You do not need to agree with someone's views on all subjects, or even to respect their motives, to ally with them. And, in particular, insiders and establishment figures, natives of the structures of power, have an invaluable part to play. Revolutionary rhetoric may make people feel good, but those who know how to work patiently and stubbornly through systems and institutions can actually get things done.

If, of course, getting things done is your goal. Then and now, many campaigners were more concerned to whip up politically useful outrage, or to burnish their own sense of their purity, than to get

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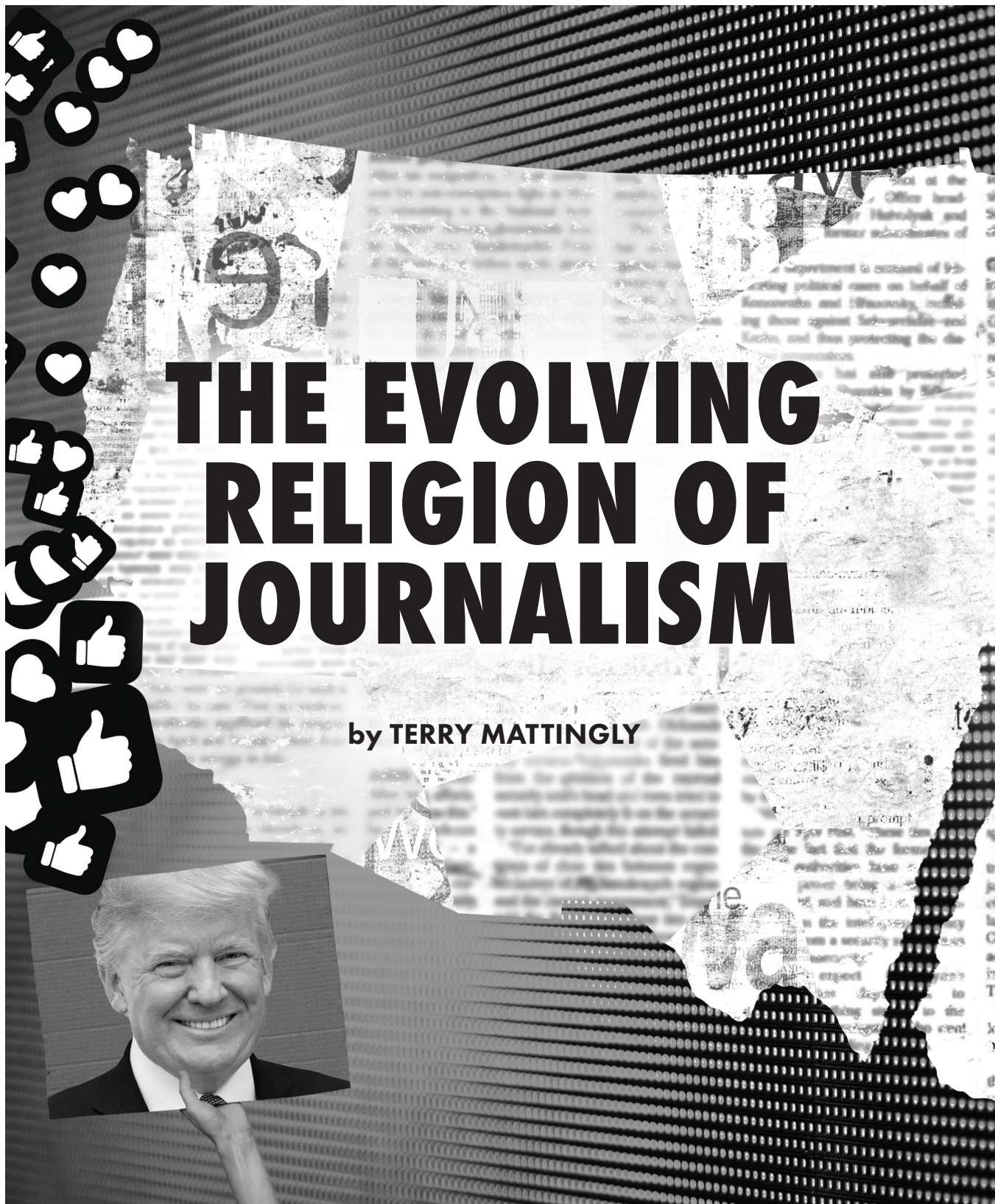
into the messy business of compromise that is the usual route to substantive change. We might, for example, look at the contrasting fortunes of the actual abolition of slavery in the British Empire and in the United States.

Slavery in the British Empire was ended through a very unheroic political deal, the centerpiece of which was the payment of handsome compensation to slaveholders for the loss of their “property.” This, in fact, was the case in every Atlantic jurisdiction where slavery was abolished, bar one. While the perpetrators of the crime of slavery were thus bought off, the victims were, naturally, left uncompensated. The injustice of these legalized ransoms was obvious even at the time. Needless to say, they have never been systematically repaid, nor have the enslaved or their descendants ever received systematic reparation.

The one exception was of course the United States, where the price to end slavery was paid in blood, and where a victorious Union at last simply imposed the legal principle that human beings are not property. It is a far purer, more righteous solution. Yet was it better? It is not simply that it cost 30 more years of servitude and half a million lives. The legacy of slavery also continues to poison the United States more deeply than any other Atlantic-facing society. Would that be different if the former slaveholders had been compensated for their “loss” instead of being defeated in war? To have offered them such a deal would have been morally repugnant; nor, to be clear, would they have accepted it. But would it have been a price worth paying?

Wilberforce would have paid it. Our consciences revolt at the thought. Perhaps it doesn't matter much anymore—what's done is done. But in our modern struggles, whatever they may be, there may also be occasions where the grand moral satisfaction of simply defeating our enemies should be weighed up against the prudence of swallowing our principles and buying their complicity. After all, if we are anything like the abolitionists of the 1780s—whose shoes few of us would be worthy to unloose—we ourselves are already far more morally compromised than we think. Giving our “enemies” enough to win their consent may not feel good, but it can actually advance the cause. It may even make it easier for us all to live together afterward. **RL**

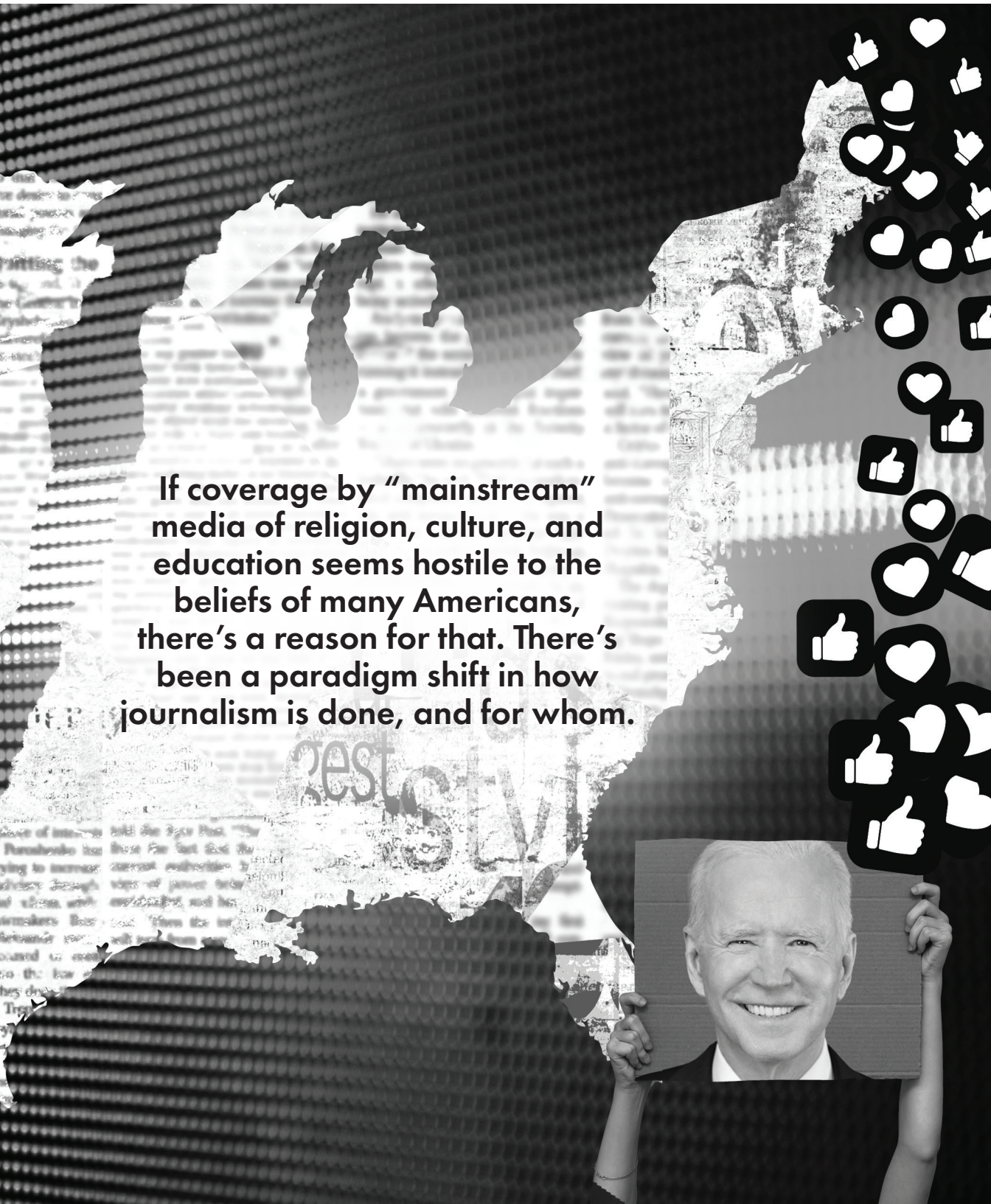
Alec Ryrie is professor of the history of Christianity at Durham.



THE EVOLVING RELIGION OF JOURNALISM

by TERRY MATTINGLY





If coverage by “mainstream” media of religion, culture, and education seems hostile to the beliefs of many Americans, there’s a reason for that. There’s been a paradigm shift in how journalism is done, and for whom.

If you're a working journalist and you believe that Donald J. Trump is a demagogue playing to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies, that he cozies up to anti-American dictators and that he would be dangerous with control of the United States nuclear codes, how the heck are you supposed to cover him?

Because if you believe all of those things, you have to throw out the textbook American journalism has been using for the better part of the past half-century, if not longer, and approach it in a way you've never approached anything in your career.

This raised a big question, he added, for journalists plunging into advocacy journalism: "Do normal standards apply? And if they don't, what should take their place?"

Questions such as these have obvious implications for coverage of American politics, especially since most American journalists see the world—even issues linked to morality, culture, and faith—through a political lens. After all, politics is real. Religion? Not so much.

But these debates have moved beyond the heated media-bias wars in recent decades. The ground under American journalism is moving and that affects all of American life, especially First Amendment issues tied to free speech, freedom of association, and religious liberty.

This earthquake is linked to the wave of technological innovations that have forced all kinds of companies, including news organizations, to change their products in an attempt to survive in the digital age. The key is a process familiar to anyone who has surfed the internet. The goal is to convince users to click "like," "forward," "tweet," "post," or, ultimately, to pay money to receive more content of this kind.

This preaching-to-the-choir business model works with cute kittens and heroic dogs. It works with emotional videos of soldiers returning home and surprising their loved ones, as well as those of rainbow-haired teachers preaching to elementary school students about gender.

This sequence works—on different audiences—with "news" about the verbal and physical stumbles

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WITH THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL election looming, the *New York Times* published a journalism manifesto that was disguised as a mere political commentary.

The candidate's name was in the headline, but the implications of the August 7, 2016, essay "Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism" included coverage of a wide range of subjects linked to the hopes, fears, and beliefs of Americans who felt driven to vote for him.

The big idea—never openly stated—was that the famous motto of America's most powerful newspaper, "All the News That's Fit to Print," could be shortened to "All the News That Fits." Writer-at-large Jim Rutenberg opened with this salvo:

of President Joe Biden or election-denying sermons by former President Trump. It works with reports about environmental apocalypse or the potential for nuclear war in Ukraine. It works when federal agents arrest grandparents protesting at abortion clinics, as well as when there are few, if any, arrests in cases involving activists vandalizing pro-life churches or fire-bombing crisis-pregnancy centers. It works when some churches close, while others stay open, during a global pandemic. It works when some parents choose to take radical actions in response to rapid gender dysphoria symptoms in their children, while others risk clashes with state authorities while opposing treatments of this kind.

These changes provide some of the digital DNA in conflicts that are tearing America apart. Politicians, parents, pastors, and plenty of other people are struggling to understand what is happening in their lives while turning to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Parler, BitChute, Gab, Gettr, Rumble, Telegram, and Truth Social. And there are darker corners of this world, such as 4chan and the “Dark Web.” And never forget this crucial journalism reality: Opinion writing is cheap, while hard-news content is expensive.

There is plenty of money to be made, but one reality looms over those trying to stay in business—researchers believe that two-thirds of ad dollars in the American marketplace head straight to Big Tech powerhouses such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon. Try operating an ordinary local or national newsroom when competing with that.

Consumers insist they are not happy about the results, but researchers note that they continue to build their own personal information bunkers using niche-news providers.

Meanwhile, a 2022 Pew Research Center study found that only 44% of journalists think “every side of an issue deserves ‘equal coverage,’” while citizens at large support balanced coverage to the tune of 76%. Young journalists were the least likely to support balanced coverage.

How will these trends affect the future? The well-known First Amendment lawyer and evangelical pundit David French described the crisis in his book *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation*. The bottom line: Americans are divided by their choices in news and popular culture, choosing to live in protective silos of digital content. America remains the developing world’s most religious nation, yet its secularized elites occupy one

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The New York Times' midtown Manhattan headquarters



Photo by Roman Babakin / iStock



1885 cartoon from *Puck* magazine depicting an army of clergymen attacking a fortress defended by newspaper editors

set of zip codes, while most religious believers live in another. These armies share no common standards about “facts,” “accuracy,” or “fairness.”

“It’s time for Americans to wake up to a fundamental reality: the continued unity of the United States cannot be guaranteed,” wrote French. At this moment, “there is not a single important cultural, religious, political, or social force that is pulling Americans together more than it is pulling us apart.”

THE AMERICAN MODEL OF THE PRESS

When media-reporter Ben Smith arrived at the *New York Times*, he immediately grasped that he had signed on with an institution that was experiencing a revolution.

“I arrived there a bit skeptical,” wrote Smith, in an essay at his *Semafor* website. “I quickly came to admire the deep commitment my colleagues had to the institution, and the durability of its folkways. But I also thrived in part because I heeded a colleague’s warning before I started: ‘Do not, under any circumstances, try to change anything.’”

But change was on the way, with internet realities forcing *Times* managers to veer into a business model in which selling consumers content, in a variety of forms, was the key to survival and then explosive growth. Questions about the old divide between advertising and editorial content, which journalists have long called the separation of church and state,

were replaced by questions about the importance of pleasing faithful readers—a loud, fervent online flock.

Smith said a former *Times* executive stressed that this particular newspaper is “a business wrapped around a church.”

Using that metaphor, it’s easy to see that today’s *Times* congregation is demanding doctrinal changes in the content of this journalism church. They want the editors, to use a Bible Belt expression, to “preach to the choir”—or suffer the consequences on Twitter and in other social-media sanctuaries.

Basically, the world’s most influential newspaper is moving away from the old free-speech liberalism of what historians call the “American model of the press,” with little public commentary about the consequences of this strategic move, other than the occasional blast of candor such as the Rutenberg essay about fighting Trump. The Gray Lady appears to be swinging back to an older European Model of the Press offering news carefully crafted to please a specific audience or, at the very least, to avoid offending it. These European-model newspapers were once defined by language, politics, economics, religion, and even race.

The key: In this older model, journalists work in newsrooms that openly state their biases, letting readers know what to expect. While journalists in these newsrooms are expected to be accurate, there is no need for balanced coverage and, often, displays of respect when dealing with opponents. This shapes

the content of the news. Some causes are logical and virtuous, while others are stupid or even dangerous. Once again, this affects issues of faith, families, education and popular culture—not just partisan politics.

This is radically different from the American Model of the Press, with its stress on letting readers make up their own minds on controversial issues after reading balanced coverage of competing points of view. Journalists working according to this model strive to follow a concept of objectivity that is defined not as a “my mind is blank” philosophy but in terms of professional standards seeking accuracy, balance, fairness, and respect.

How do journalists know, in the American model, that they are getting the job done? Journalists at the Poynter Institute have long used a helpful term—“stakeholders”—in these discussions. They define a “stakeholder” as someone whose life will be directly impacted by a particular news story. When stakeholders keep saying coverage is inaccurate, that’s bad. When stakeholders consistently say coverage is biased, it’s important to hear them and consider whether they are speaking the truth.

Meanwhile, how do journalists in the digital-market European model know they are getting the job done? That’s easy: When readers are happy.

CLASHING LIBERAL ORTHODOXIES

For readers who have paid close attention to coverage of religion and culture in recent decades—which I have done as a syndicated columnist, media professor, and media critic at GetReligion.org—it’s clear that evolving doctrines at the *Times* are typical of a wider revolution.

But discussing events at the *Times* deserve special attention because choices made in that company influence so many elite reporters, editors, and news-business managers in other news organizations. What happens at the *Times* will eventually affect the Associated Press, for example, leading to changes in local and regional newspapers from coast to coast.

Religious faith is part of that equation. As then-*Times* editor Dean Baquet told National Public Radio in 2016 while discussing the election: “We don’t get religion. We don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives.”

Thus, here is a three-act summary of some key moments in an ongoing journalism passion play in America’s most powerful newsroom.

ACT I: “THE ORTHODOXY OF NO ORTHODOXIES”

In 2004, New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen published a provocative *PressThink* essay under this headline: “Journalism Is Itself a Religion,” with this caption, “A Theological Investigation.” He noted that much of the debate about the ethics and even morality of modern journalism, or even what he called the “priesthood of the press,” revolves around a specific question: “What results from the ‘relative godlessness of mainstream journalists?’” This has led to fierce debates about the quality of religion-news coverage in the press, or the lack of accurate, informed coverage.

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**AS DEAN BAQUET TOLD
NATIONAL PUBLIC
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ELECTION: ‘WE DON’T GET
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IN PEOPLE’S LIVES.’**
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All this led Rosen to discuss a famous *New York Times Magazine* story in 1999 about the religious beliefs of a radical anti-abortion activist. It included these words from reporter David Samuels: “It is a shared if unspoken premise of the world that most of us inhabit that absolutes do not exist and that people who claim to have found them are crazy.”

Critics, Rosen noted, thought this declaration that there are no absolute moral truths sounded like “dogma.” It was also clear that “the world that most of us inhabit” consisted of zip codes close to the *Times*, if not the newsroom itself. To illustrate this, he turned to one of my national “On Religion” columns, in which I interviewed William Proctor—a Harvard Law graduate and the former legal affairs reporter for the *New York Daily News*. Proctor is the author of the 2000 book *The Gospel According to the New York Times*.

Rosen quoted the following: “Critics are wrong if they claim that *The New York Times* is a bastion of secularism....In its own way, the newspaper is crusading to reform society and even to convert wayward ‘fundamentalists.’ Thus, when listing the ‘deadly sins’ that are opposed by the *Times*, [Proctor] deliberately did not claim that it rejects religious faith. Instead, he said the world’s most influential newspaper condemns ‘the sin of religious certainty.’”

This “orthodoxy of forbidding all orthodoxies,” noted Rosen, attacked transcendent truth claims from traditional religious faiths. Here is another bite from my column:

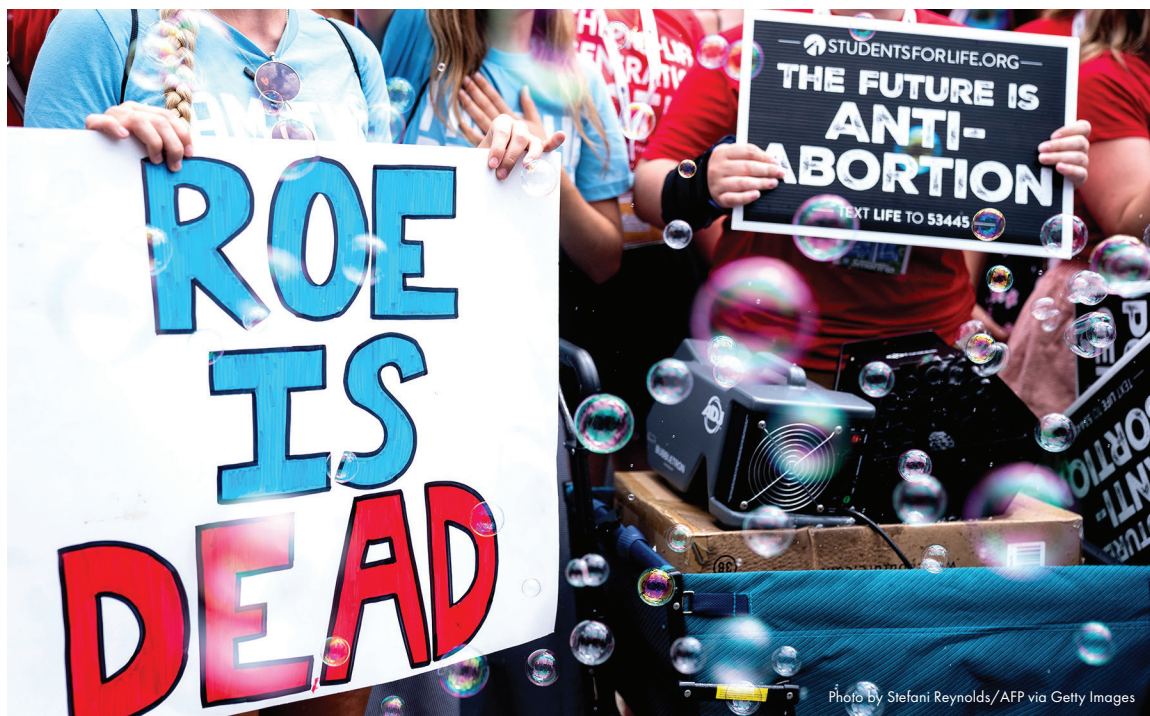
“Yet here’s the irony of it all. The agenda the *Times* advocates is based on a set of absolute truths,” said Proctor. Its leaders are “absolutely sure that the religious groups they consider intolerant and judgmental are absolutely wrong, especially traditional Roman Catholics, evangelicals and most Orthodox Jews. And they are just as convinced that the religious groups that they consider tolerant and progressive are absolutely right.”

How does this affect coverage of the lives and beliefs of ordinary Americans?

ACT II: FORMER *TIMES* EDITOR BILL KELLER HINTS AT CHANGING *TIMES*

Soon after stepping down as the editor of the *New York Times*, Bill Keller traveled to Austin, Texas, for a 2011 forum at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. To no one’s surprise, he was asked if his newspaper could be called “liberal.”

Pro-life activists outside the U.S. Supreme Court after the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* in June 2022



Keller claimed that *Times* professionals, during his tenure, worked hard to be balanced and fair when covering politics. But the same rules didn't apply, he said, when covering matters of morality, religion, and social change. That's when journalists viewed the world through what he described as a sophisticated, intellectual, tolerant lens.

"We're liberal in the sense that...liberal arts schools are liberal," he said. "We are liberal in the sense that we are open-minded, sort of tolerant, urban. Our wedding page includes—and did even before New York had a gay marriage law—gay unions. So, we're liberal in that sense of the word, I guess. Socially liberal."

Asked if the *Times* favored the political left, he added: "Aside from the liberal values, sort of social values thing that I talked about, no, I don't think that it does."

Note these crucial words: "*aside from*." The problem is that hot-button social issues have, after *Roe v. Wade*, dominated American politics, especially in elections linked to seats on the U.S. Supreme Court. According to Keller, his newsroom did old-school journalism—except when dealing with issues such as abortion, euthanasia, sexuality, marriage, family, gay rights, education, cloning, and other sensitive matters that are inevitably linked to religion. *That's all*.

Again, journalists tend to see religious issues such as these through the lens of politics. Thus, Keller—a self-identified "crashed Catholic"—once wrote a column arguing that believers, especially evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics, should face special scrutiny when seeking higher office. After all, he argued, if a candidate believes "space aliens dwell among us," shouldn't voters know if beliefs of this kind will shape public policies?

This worldview may make it hard to cover news outside New York City. Keller noted that columnist Daniel Okrent once "rightly scolded us for sometimes seeming to look down our urban noses at the churchgoing, the gun-owning and the unlettered."

ACT III: THE EXIT OF LIZ SPAYD, THE PUBLIC EDITOR WHO ASKED HARD QUESTIONS

Former religion-beat pro Kelly McBride was not amused when she heard that the *New York Times* had pushed public editor Liz Spayd out the door after her candid and often scathing essays following Trump's victory.

"No, *New York Times*! Not the public editor! Why, with trust in news organizations at an all-time low,

would you cut the one position dedicated to holding your journalists to account in public? We need you to reconsider," she wrote in a 2017 online essay written as the Poynter Institute's journalism ethics specialist. "We know you can pay for it. Thanks to a big increase in subscribers (whom the public editor represents!) your digital revenues are at an all-time high."

A former leader of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Spayd was an old-guard liberal charged with defending essential standards in the newsroom. She opened one early piece, entitled "Why Readers See *The Times* as Liberal," with this overture:

I have been here less than a month, but already I've discovered something that surely must be bad for business if your business is running *The New York Times*. It comes via the inbox to the public editor, from people like Gary Taustine of Manhattan, who writes: "*The NY Times* is alienating its independent and open-minded readers, and in doing so, limiting the reach of their message and its possible influence."

Another reader from California went further, accusing *Times* journalists of trying to sway public opinion: "I never thought I'd see the day when I, as a liberal, would start getting so frustrated with the one-sided reporting that I would start hopping over to the Fox News webpage to read an article and get the rest of the story that the NYT refused to publish."

It's important to note that Spayd was stressing complaints from *Times* readers, not conservative trolls or religious conservatives. Her concerns focused on whether *Times* leaders were refusing to listen to crucial voices in public discourse and, thus, were missing many big stories in American life—period.

The big question: Was the *New York Times* still trying to cover news in America as a whole, or merely zip codes in its subscriber base? This led to a blunt Spayd column with this headline: "Want to Know What America's Thinking? Try Asking."

Here's another important comment, as quoted by Spayd. A Houston reader wrote:

Now that the world has been upended and you are all, to a person, in a state of surprise and shock, you may want to consider whether you should change your focus from telling the reader what and how to think, and instead devote yourselves to finding out what the reader (and nonreaders) actually think. [*sic*]

Yes, Trump's rhetoric, noted Spayd, was an essential element of election coverage. But Trump became the only "conservative" story in the elite press—with editors ignoring many of the moral, cultural, and religious concerns of voters who voted for him or against Democrat Hillary Clinton. The politics of Trump "drowned out the kind of agenda-free, deep narratives that could have taken *Times* readers deeper into the lives and values of the people who just elected the next president."

There's that journalism doctrine question, again. Was the *Times* team willing to listen to voices outside the newsroom or the loud social-media choir of its subscribers? That question appears to have been too much for *Times* management. Spayd had to go.

THE VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY

The revolution taking place inside the *New York Times* can be seen—often in more subtle forms—in many other newsrooms, from the Associated Press to *USA Today* and NPR, from the *Washington Post* to the *Los Angeles Times*. In broadcast journalism, it's easy to understand the niche-media appeal of MSNBC on the left and Fox News on the right.

Meanwhile, CNN has faced a ratings crisis in a world in which there were other storylines to cover now that Donald Trump was no longer in office. Management attempted, with a few strategic personnel changes, to suggest that CNN wanted to reclaim its old motto, "The most trusted name in news," with programing for all Americans.

CNN's future mattered to millions of news consumers, wrote Tom Jones, senior media writer at the Poynter Institute. He quoted a *Chicago Tribune* editorial, noting: "CNN is hewing toward the center?"

“ IS OPPRESSION IN UKRAINE NEWSWORTHY BUT NOT THE MASSACRE OF CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA? ”

That's good for our democracy. ... Granted, not every issue has two sides...but most of them do."

There was a problem with that call for balance, argued Jones: "All Americans aren't reasonable enough or willing to accept what's true."

And there's the rub. For millions of Americans, the "truth" is determined by whatever news sources they choose to embrace and support with their time, money, and clicks. In this America, there is no need for citizens to tolerate the views of those considered bigoted, ignorant, dangerous, or intolerant. This is true with debates in pews, as well as ballot boxes.

This shift in the marketplace has impacted coverage, or the lack of coverage, of many issues, including religion. Is violence in public life bad or is it acceptable when practiced by sympathetic activists? Is oppression in Ukraine newsworthy but not the massacre of Christians in Nigeria? Do the First Amendment rights of prison inmates matter but not those of bakers, florists, and website designers? Do progressive parents have the right to take their children to drag queen story hours, while conservative parents struggle to protect their children from educational materials containing similar themes and images that they believe attack their faith?

Under the American Model of the Press, journalists were asked to produce coverage of hot-button stories such as these with an emphasis on balance, fairness, accuracy, and "objectivity." The goal was to provide information that could be trusted by as many readers as possible, which was good for advertising and the bottom line.

That was then. What happens now? In their 2014 book, *The New Ethics of Journalism*, Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute and Tom Rosenstiel of the American Press Institute focused on journalists seeking "transparency" as opposed to a "false omniscience" or mandatory demands for "objectivity."

In an updated Poynter credo, they urged journalists to "show how the reporting was done and why people should believe it. Explain your sources, evidence and the choices you made." This led to their key guideline for the Internet age:

Clearly articulate your journalism approach, whether you strive for independence or approach information from a political or philosophical point of view. Describe how your point of view impacts the information you report, including how you select the topics you cover and the sources that inform your work.



Twitter headquarters in San Francisco

So far, newsroom leaders have avoided making clear declarations about the worldviews that shape their coverage, says journalism historian Marvin Olasky, author of numerous books such as *Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism*, and an affiliate scholar and fellow of the Acton Institute. During three decades as editor of *World* magazine, Olasky was a strong advocate of “directed reporting” and a “biblical objectivity” model, with its roots in the older European Model of the Press.

If the new goal is “transparency,” candid newsroom managers will need new ways to build trust with potential readers, he says, reached by telephone. In the old days, this meant protecting work in the newsroom from management’s concerns about business and advertising—the old “separation of church and state.”

“If you don’t have that separation, it’s hard to maintain honesty when you are trying to be transparent with readers,” adds Olasky, who stepped down as editor of *World* after what he told the *New York Times* was in essence a no-confidence vote by the magazine’s board. The issue was the creation of a new opinion-driven *World* website that would run alongside work in news.

The progressive *Texas Tribune*, notes Olasky, publishes the names of all its donors online, “whether they donate \$100,000 or \$5.” Other publications—liberal or conservative—should be that candid. “Plus, if there’s a big donor who is related in some way to a particular story, that should be disclosed at the end of an article,” he adds.

But in the brave new world of digital journalism, news organizations will need to be honest about the impact of their readers on the news product. After all, subscribers are now just as powerful as advertisers, and that clout is growing year after year.

“That equation has become obvious,” says Olasky. However, elite journalists have not been willing to say, “We are creating our news to fit a specific audience.”

This was the reality that former *Times* editorial-page editor Bari Weiss addressed in her much-discussed resignation letter in 2020, after she defended an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton arguing that National Guard troops could be used to protect urban neighborhoods threatened by late-night rioters claiming to be part of the Black Lives Matters movement.

“A new consensus has emerged in the press, but perhaps especially at this paper: that truth isn’t a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else,” wrote Weiss, whose old-school First Amendment liberalism became heresy in the newsroom. “Twitter is not on the masthead of *The New York Times*. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor.”

In this environment an ancient question has become relevant: What is truth?

“Objectivity or, maybe, even accuracy, isn’t something that many journalists are going to be too worried about right now,” says Olasky. “After all, any sense of objectivity presumes some form of belief in objective truth.” This has to affect how news organizations cover religion news and political debates linked to morality and culture.

What does transparency mean in the Twitter age? While it’s relatively easy for publishers to be transparent about donors, it’s harder to imagine how they can “be transparent about the biases found in their reader base, in terms of their incomes, political biases, and where they live and work,” Olasky notes. “We appear to have entered an age in which readers will have to treat newsrooms like political parties. We need more information about what is shaping the news, as we try to make informed choices. ... If transparency is the new model, then media reporters need to pressure news organizations to publish more information on all of these issues.”

The sobering bottom line: When seeking journalism they can trust, perhaps even news that offers balanced, accurate coverage of views other than their own, American citizens are on their own as they search the World Wide Web. God help them. **RL**

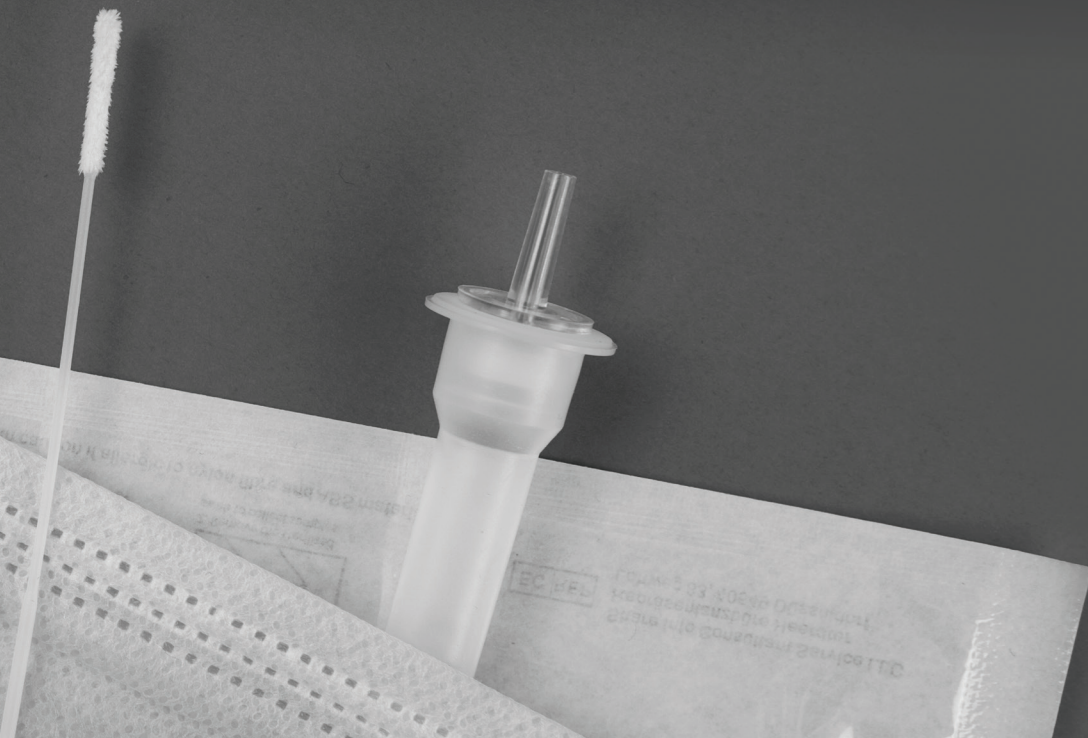
Terry Mattingly (tmatt.net) leads *GetReligion.org* and lives in Oak Ridge, Tenn. He is a senior fellow at the Overby Center at the University of Mississippi.

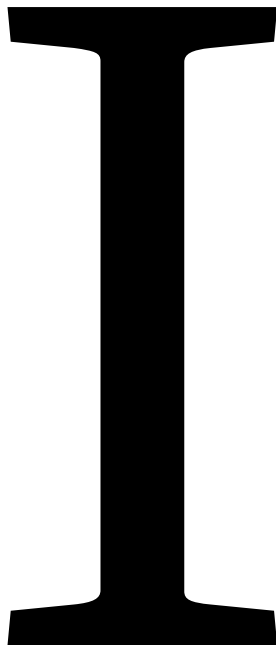
THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT OF ANTI-CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

by D. G. HART



Worries about the rise of Christian nationalism abound in both popular and scholarly circles, but are they warranted? Can we test for it? Some historical perspective is in order.





IN THE EARLY DAYS of the COVID-19 pandemic—well beyond the initial two weeks to flatten the curve, but in August of 2020—the *New York Times* reported, in an article entitled “Your Coronavirus Test Is Positive. Maybe It Shouldn’t Be,” on scientists’ worries about the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. The means by which public health workers and government officials (not to mention journalists) were assessing the spread of the virus was, some feared, too sensitive. People were testing positive who “may be carrying relatively insignificant amounts of the virus.” Results from three states (Massachusetts, New York, and Nevada), the story added, showed that



The Ten Commandments displayed at the Texas State Capitol

“90 percent of people testing positive carried barely any virus.” In other words, 85% to 90% of people testing positive would have been technically COVID-free if the test’s sensitivity had been recalibrated.

Christian nationalism is not obviously connected to COVID-19, but the recent work of sociologists indicates that testing for this strain of patriotism is as important as the PCR test was for the pandemic. One of the parallels between Christian nationalism and COVID is the level of hysteria that both provoke among those who keep the gates of information in the United States (and western societies more generally). Christian nationalism has not generated international conferences of scientific experts presenting papers the way climate change and COVID have. But thanks to Donald Trump and the events of January 6, 2021, many editors, scholars, and government officials regard people who think America has a Christian character a threat to liberal democracy. To find the Americans carrying this religio-political virus (CHRISTNAT-21?), sociologists have created a test. Actually, it is a social science survey the answers

to which indicate whether someone carries the contagion of Christian nationalism.

Both *Taking America Back for God* and *The Flag and the Cross* rely on virtually the same sets of polling data.* This is not surprising since both coauthored books share one author in common, Samuel L. Perry, who teaches sociology at the University of Oklahoma. (The other authors, Andrew L. Whitehead [*Taking America Back for God*] teaches sociology at Clemson University, and Philip S. Gorski [*The Flag and the Cross*] teaches sociology at Yale University.) Both books use the following six statements to discern levels of attachment to Christian nationalism:

- “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.”
- “The federal government should advocate Christian values.”
- “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state.”
- “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.”
- “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.”
- “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.”

The Flag and the Cross uses one more statement from a different data set: “I consider founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution to be divinely inspired.”

This difference does not prevent the books from establishing a metric by which to detect strains of Christian nationalism. On a spectrum of 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), the authors arrive at totals (0–24 or 0–28, depending on the survey) that in turn place respondents in the categories of “Rejecters” (opponents), “Resisters” and “Accommodators” (undecided), and “Ambassadors” (“wholly supportive”). The totals (from Whitehead and Perry) indicate that 19.8% of Americans are Ambassadors, 32.1% Accommodators, 26.6% Resisters, and 21.5% Rejecters.

Compared to the alarm that journalists implied with headlines about the 81% of white evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump, the numbers are not obviously frightening. But calm is not the tone of these books. All three authors are fearful about the threat posed by Christian nationalism (and indirectly, white evangelicals) to a liberal democratic polity. This is still the case even though Whitehead and Perry observe that white evangelicals are no

more prone to Christian nationalism than other American Christians. For instance, in 2016 even 25% of Resisters (undecided) voted for Trump. And not all (75%) Ambassadors (wholly supportive) cast a ballot for the Republican. Meanwhile, the category of Ambassadors (wholly supportive) included 85% of evangelicals, 83% of mainline Protestants, and 79% of Roman Catholics. Perhaps one of the most surprising findings from Whitehead and Perry is that evangelicals account for 27% of Rejecters (opponents) compared to zero for mainline Protestants (Roman Catholics were 4% of this group).

Just like the PCR test in its take-home version, readers of these books can also take their own Christian nationalist temperature. (Forgive the use of the first-person singular, but I know no other way to report on my own responses.) Bottom line: I tested positive, though at the low end of the Accommodators (which runs between 12 and 17 on the 0–24 spectrum). For instance, I strongly oppose the federal government issuing a declaration that the United States is a Christian nation (0 points). But for the government to advocate Christian values, like banning murder, lying, and stealing, I

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President Donald Trump holding the Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church after it was damaged in June 2020

am unsure about the way to do this (2 points). On the strict enforcement of separating of church and state, I tend to disagree (1 point); the word “strict” is the hang-up, because zeal in doing so can wind up with French-style *laïcité*, which has never been the American version of relating church and state. On government’s allowing for religious symbols in public spaces (agree 3 points) and prayer in public schools (agree 3 points), I put a lot of weight on “allow.” The verb suggests that government is not going impose such religious expressions but will stand back and let other institutions decide (like local governments or neighborhood associations—even teachers unions). As for the idea that the United States’ success is part of God’s plan (agree 3 points)—how could anyone who believes in a sovereign God not believe some divine purpose is responsible for America’s place in the world? At the same time, “success” is imprecise, since it could indicate approval of America’s emergence as a superpower or it could mean approving of religion’s remarkable prevalence in American society.

All of which is to say that, as with many pollster questions, these phrases are either misleading or imprecise in ways that hardly invite firm conclusions about a response’s meaning. That said, my total points (12) make me a Christian nationalist,

a classification that would surprise many who have criticized me in the past for divorcing faith from politics and arguing that the church should mind its own business. (For more on that, see my *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State*.) If a conservative Presbyterian who has long argued that the church should stay out of politics tests positive for Christian nationalism, someone could wonder if sociologists need an equivalent to what epidemiologists have in asymptomatic carriers of COVID. Can a class of Christian nationalists exist who have no strong symptoms of this political virus? If so, do they need to be in political isolation?

JANUARY 6 AND ALL THAT

The ambiguity of the survey questions extends to the repeated use of “federal government.” Not to be overly precious, but the federal government does have three branches of government. What sorts of results would surveys have yielded had they inserted “executive order by the president” in one or “law passed by Congress” in another, or if “the Supreme Court ruled” in yet another. The repetition of “federal government” not only ignores the branches and agencies in Washington but also trips over respondents with

localist or states' rights convictions. If prayer in public schools admits of everything from a football coach praying with his team before a game to a student crossing herself after praying over a meal in the cafeteria, the use of "federal government" as a stand in for nationalism borders on silly.

Still, these books rely on imprecise social scientific instruments to sound the alarm about the threat that Christian nationalism is to American society and institutions. In Whitehead and Perry's book, published in 2020 and so written before the drama of January 6, 2021, the danger of Christian nationalism is not as immediate as in Gorski and Perry, published with January 6 in view. On the eve of the 2020 general election, Whitehead and Perry clarified that Christian nationalism was different from both support for Donald Trump and white evangelicalism. Indeed, Christian nationalism was a greater predictor of support for Trump than evangelicalism. But in their conclusion, they worried that Christian nationalism might tip the scales in Donald Trump's favor. This religious and political outlook, they predicted, would be part of the president's appeal to his voters and distract from his moral failings. Their concerns went beyond the election to a fear that Christian nationalism hurt a proper understanding of the Christian religion. Warning about this toxic form of nationalism, then, might help evangelicals recover their true faith. One of *Taking America Back for God's* epigrams (the other a quotation from Reinhold Niebuhr) is Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." For sociologists to hold this up as a standard is a tad awkward, since they are not using Christ as the standard for their academic procedures.

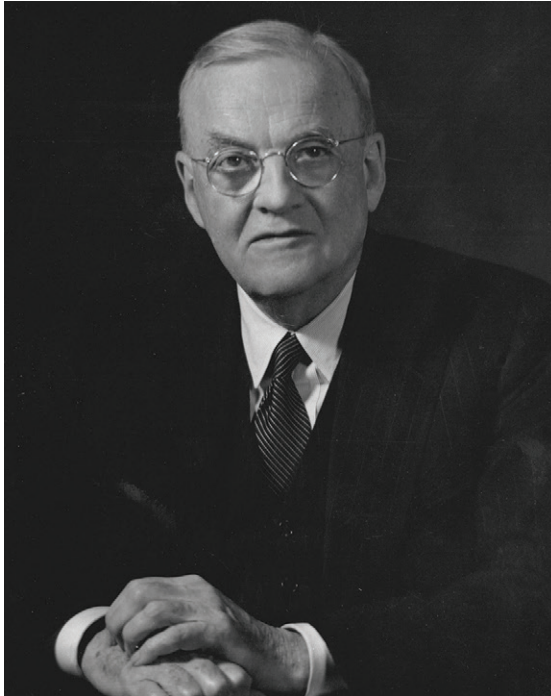
The danger posed by Christian nationalism for Gorski and Perry rises to existential because it was responsible for January 6. That riot frames the book from the introduction to the last chapter, entitled "Avoiding the Big One" (i.e., the "Capitol insurrection"). The kaleidoscopic display of symbols at the January 6 uprising—Confederate flags, "Don't Tread on Me" banners, "Jesus Saves" T-shirts, wooden crosses, and wooden gallows—becomes coherent under the tent of "white Christian nationalism." The presence of this ideology on January 6, combined with similar polling results to that recorded in *Taking America Back for God*, prompts Gorski and Perry to worry, by the end of their book, that another coup

might occur. They also believe Republicans will be responsible for it. Restrictions on voting rights, gerrymandering, and even "support for the Electoral College," policies they associate with the GOP, all correlate "highly" with support for Christian nationalism. Possible scenarios include: MAGA types might migrate to Dallas and Orlando, college-educated whites to Seattle and Chicago, with secession or civil war based on this regional isolation. For this reason, Gorski and Perry warn that "Trumpist America would not be Hitler's Germany," but it would not be "far removed from Putin's Russia either." Making America great would likely result then—despite the comparisons to Hitler and Putin—in a nation "chaotic and poor."

The change in tone between the two books, from never-Trumpish to apocalyptic alarm, is striking but likely indicates more about the authors' own fears than it reflects the actual state of affairs in contemporary America. This essay is not—underscore *not*—part of a sanguine assessment of contemporary America. Wealth gaps, unimpressive political leadership, incoherent foreign policy, and heightened partisanship that inspired both months of urban riots and January 6—these are just a few reasons for worrying about the United States. At the same time, if authors describe America in ways that lead them to comparisons with Hitler's Germany and Putin's Russia, and then describe the dire situation as merely "chaotic and poor," readers may reach the end of *The Flag and the Cross* relieved, which is the opposite of the book's intent.

Gorski and Perry also end with a set of prescriptions designed to save America. They call for a "popular front" to defend liberal democracy. This alliance needs to include democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders, classical liberals like Bill Kristol and David French, #NeverTrump evangelicals like Russell Moore and Tim Keller. That is an odd list that gives a huge berth to white evangelicals and ignores real political figures among Republicans at the federal and state levels. For evangelicals who join, they will need to confront their history of providing theological justification for "racism, imperialism, and exploitation." Mainline Protestants also have some explaining to do: They will need to own up to their previous support for eugenics, imperialism, and nativism, and in contemporary America lending aid to a society that breeds "workism," "meritocracy," and "technocracy."

Even so, this practical advice is underwhelming compared to the threat the authors describe. If Gorski



U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (1888–1959)

and Perry are right, as they insist in the penultimate sentence of the book, that Trump and his followers “have rejected America’s experiment with multiracial democracy in favor of white Christian nationalism,” how is a historical reckoning going to allow time for forming a popular front? The very last sentence, not one typical in a work of scholarship—“Whether [Trump’s supporters] are successful is up to the rest of us”—turns the book into the proverbial red pill that is supposed to provoke action (like applying for work with the FBI?). Such activist scholarship (an oxymoron?) rarely produces understanding of the subject under scrutiny, and *The Flag and the Cross* suffers from this defect. And yet, both books are standard-issue university press publications with all the apparatuses of end notes, bibliographies, and scholarly protocol. The calm necessary for such academic communication implies that America is more calm than it is under siege.

NATIONALISM, MOM, AND APPLE PIE

Historical perspective could alleviate some of these sociologists’ fears. An earlier generation of scholars wrote about Christian nationalism, admitted it had its problems, all the while keeping their heads. For

instance, a little over five decades ago, Martin E. Marty and Robert T. Handy, two prominent figures in American religious history, wrote books showing that Christian nationalism was as basic to America as mom and apple pie. By no means did they approve of it. After the tumultuous 1960s, any scholar worth his social awareness needed to address race relations and the status of women, not to mention the anti-Catholicism that had been such a prominent part of the Protestant experience in the United States, as well as the Western chauvinism that had been part of foreign missions. Neither book celebrated or apologized for Christian nationalism. Nor did Marty and Handy conclude that either the churches’ standing in American society or the nation itself was illegitimate.

For instance, in *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America*, Marty wrote calmly that evangelical Protestants (he was using it in the pre-Moral Majority sense of the wide family of denominations that traced its origins to Britain most recently and then to the Reformation more generically) set out to create an empire in America. In this realm, Protestants “set out to attract the allegiance of all the people to develop a spiritual kingdom, and to shape the nation’s ethos, mores, manners, and often its laws.” From this followed policies to turn public schools into agencies of social engineering that would assimilate ethnic immigrants into the American way of life. So, too, came reforms like women’s suffrage, Prohibition, and even an interventionist foreign policy based on, in FDR’s words, the cosmic struggle between God and Hitler. Although those pieces of Christian nationalism may have raised dilemmas for church folk and academics by the 1960s, the churches’ support for civil rights, thanks in part to Martin Luther King Jr.’s own Christian nationalism, made American hopes for a righteous empire look not so bad.

In *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, Handy echoed Marty’s narrative, observing matter-of-factly that, from the beginning, “American Protestants entertained a lively hope that someday the civilization of the country would be fully Christian.” The outworkings of this ideal—hold on to your seats—varied over three centuries. But through it all, Protestants drew direction and inspiration from a vision of Christian America. That outlook “cut across denominational differences and furnished goals toward which all could work.”

The sociologists under review here could well counter that Marty and Handy were writing at a time when Christian nationalism was receiving a

much-needed correction and was also receding from a prominent part of the American Protestant denominations' self-understanding. This is fair, though it does not explain why Whitehead, Perry, and Gorski do not highlight the high levels of Christian nationalism among mainline Protestants. Nor does their heightened awareness of white evangelicals do justice to the real power that mainline Protestants who were government officials during the Cold War had (think John Foster Dulles in the State Department and his brother, Allen, as head of the CIA) compared to the atmospheric shenanigans of evangelical MAGA-hat-wearing protesters and television evangelists in bright suits.

Just as important is the refusal of scholars in the generation of Marty and Handy to rush from the evidence of Christian nationalism to a conclusion that questioned the United States' legitimacy as a liberal democracy because of Protestant hegemony. Handy, for instance, when describing the loss of Protestant consensus and influence in the 1930s, observed that Protestant nationalism had "left the nation with a complex heritage of impressive achievements and visible limitations." On the plus side, Handy included various reforms, such as education, expanding suffrage, protection of children, efforts to curb runaway wealth, religious freedom, civil liberties, and even the end of slavery. To be sure, many of these reforms came with negative examples (eugenics and Prohibition) and failed to be implemented as extensively as they might have been thanks to blind spots, self-righteousness,

and downright bigotry. But, as Handy also wrote, "Either to mourn, to praise, or to condemn indiscriminately what has passed is not as helpful as an effort to understand it for what [Christian nationalism] was and for what it tried to do, and for what its continuing influence on the nation and its churches is."

THE FEAR FACTOR

Why then did scholars 50 years ago practice restraint compared to the hysteria that characterizes academic literature on Christian nationalism today? One obvious explanation is the election of Donald Trump and the support he received from white evangelicals. With the exception of Trump's Christian-friendly signals, like saying "Merry Christmas" or holding a Bible for photographers after protests over policing in June of 2020, he was not obviously a spokesman for Christianity. If Trump did not add the Christian religion to Christian nationalism, white evangelicals do provide a measure of spiritual substance. At the same time, evangelical support for Trump was close to what it had been for George W. Bush (only three percentage points more), the president who came closest arguably to being a born-again Republican executive.

Fear is another factor, since many of the most highly regarded interpreters of American society have viewed Trump since November 2016 as little more than a fascist. With a figure like him at the head of the federal government's executive branch, scholars need not explain but merely rally opposition. Simply understanding a phenomenon will not address the immediate threat. Indeed, the threat is no longer a possibility. January 6 proves Christian nationalism is alive and ill.

Combined with urgency is a set of associations that today's academics, fresh from the first African American president, never imagined possible for the United States. How could America go from Obama to Trump in one election? This is why the comparisons between today's scholars and those like Marty and Handy is instructive. That older generation did not need to imagine but knew how bad America was thanks to racism, sexism, and nationalism. They had lived through the riots, protests, legislation, wars, and cultural revolutions of the 1960s. But they nevertheless studied the place of Protestantism in that dark American past (even as self-identified Protestants) responsibly.

They were scholars who worked on campuses that provided space for tributes to notable figures from

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WHY DID SCHOLARS 50 YEARS AGO PRACTICE RESTRAINT COMPARED TO THE HYSTERIA THAT CHARACTERIZES ACADEMIC LITERATURE ON CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM TODAY?

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the past with monuments or names of buildings. Neither Handy nor Marty taught at the University of Pennsylvania, but they worked in the shadows of luminaries like evangelist George Whitefield, whose statue until 2020 graced the institution's Dormitory Quadrangle. Those older scholars understood that figures like Whitefield were not pure but still worthy of honor. Yet, when the administration at the University of Pennsylvania decided to remove the evangelist's statue, a man with close ties to the university's founder, Benjamin Franklin, its report indicated surprise about Whitefield's mix of sin and sanctity. The "case for removing Whitefield is overwhelmingly strong," the report explained. "He was a well-known evangelical preacher in the mid-eighteenth century, who notably led a successful campaign to allow slavery in Georgia." Slavery, consequently, became

Statue of George Whitefield at the University of Pennsylvania, prior to its 2020 removal



"undeniably" one of Whitefield's "principal legacies." For that reason, honoring him was "inconsistent with our University's core values."

Of course, scholars will disagree about a historical figure's principal legacy. Still, for most of American history, scholars identified Whitefield with the religious enterprises described in Franklin's *Autobiography*. The university's verdict stemmed not from scholarship but the protests that followed the killing of George Floyd. Historians had long known that Whitefield went back on his opposition to slavery under the practical need for labor in Georgia. Or is it the case that the history department at Penn was unaware of colonial American developments and so failed to alert the administration to the awkward messages sent by Whitefield's statue?

Like the University of Pennsylvania, Whitehead, Perry, and Gorski selectively employ U.S. history to support their arguments. In *Taking America Back for God*, the authors spend almost no time on previous examples of Christian nationalism. In their endnotes, Whitehead and Perry do refer to books that trace the history of their subject. But in one noticeably long reference, they list 11 books most of which were published after the election of Donald Trump. Only four were published between 2006 and 2014. Whitehead and Perry also recommend that future scholars research Christian nationalism among Blacks and ethnic minorities. There they observe that leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. took seriously "the Christian heritage of the United States" and did so to call Americans "to live up to the promises of freedom and equality inherent within the Christian religion." What goes unmentioned is any distinction between good and bad versions of Christian nationalism. From the premise that American exceptionalism is a threat to Christianity's integrity, what do Whitehead and Perry do with the Black church's mix of biblical morality and national ideals in advocating civil rights? To raise that question could jeopardize solidarity with Black Protestant reformers. To avoid the predicament, the authors could define Christian nationalism in a way that makes some forms legitimate. But they do not.

A lack of history is not true for Gorski and Perry. *The Flag and the Cross* adds a hashtag to the American history wars—the #1690Project. This was the year that Puritans first fused racism, apocalypticism, and nationalism. Their dating is not exact. "It was around 1690, following King Philip's War, that the deep story first crystallized in the form of white Protestant

chosenness.” This date allows the authors to feature the humiliating treatment of indigenous populations by Europeans. Why Gorski and Perry did not choose an earlier date is a mystery, since English settlers in both Virginia and Massachusetts treated natives wretchedly as soon as they arrived. But identifying 1690 as the start of Christian nationalism in its ugliest form does begin their brief (one chapter) narrative of woe—wars with Native Americans, slavery, Manifest Destiny and wars against Mexico and Spain, conquest and imperialism, and Christian nationalism in the fight against communism during the Cold War. It is a story free from historical perspective on the present. And the irony is that Whitehead and Perry in *Taking America Back for God* acknowledge that Democrats need to develop a “coherent narrative that taps into a powerful national identity” if they are going to defeat Trump in the 2020 election. These sociologists know that narratives matter to national identity, but the times demand a story that is full of horror. That is an admission that national narratives matter. And yet the only one available in either book is a story of evil begetting more evil. Let us see if any candidate can appeal to voters with that.

AMERICA’S DEBT TO CHRISTIANITY

The presence of Christian nationalism in America’s past matters to the sociological investigation on tap in these books because its prevalence in U.S. history explains to a large degree its contemporary pervasiveness. It is part of the historical imagination of many Americans, and also belongs to the narrative that scholars tell about the United States. Its reality and influence is no reason to celebrate it. Nor is it a reason to find it scary, since it has long been part of the American experience. Instead of being alarmed by these sociologists’ findings, readers can simply attribute high levels of Christian nationalism to the American people and the nation’s institutions as they have developed since the colonial era.

Aside from the errors that afflict single-cause explanations of American greatness or wickedness, attributing the pernicious aspects of the United States to Christian nationalism may represent a greater existential threat to the nation than fusing Christianity to national identity. In fact, if scholars at elite universities who write for university presses, along with history and social science teachers in American high schools, remove the religious component of American exceptionalism and treat Christianity as a problem,

what will fill the void to inspire the sorts of collective purpose that Christian nationalism provided? From John Winthrop and George Washington, to Abraham Lincoln and FDR, America’s debt to Christianity as the source of hope, reform, and national mission was large. Now to overturn and dispose of it is an endeavor so radical that it turns even Joe Biden into a threat. After all, when he spoke in Philadelphia from the “sacred ground” of Independence Hall about America’s egalitarian ideals, ones that made the United States “unique among nations” and made the nation a “beacon to the world,” he was in danger of unleashing the very MAGA impulses about which these sociologists warn. **RL**

** The weeds of survey results may elude many readers as they do this author, but a word of explanation may be in order. Whitehead and Perry draw their evidence from the Baylor Religion Survey of 2017—a poll sent through the mail that pays \$1 to anyone who returns a completed survey. It went out to 11,000 addresses; 1,501 persons (13.5%) replied. The authors write that this survey compares favorably with one they did not use, the “gold standard” of national surveys, the General Social Survey. They do provide a comparison of the latter and the former and acknowledge differences, but assert that these are not significant. The authors also observe that the Baylor survey “has already begun to appear in a number of peer-reviewed articles in a variety of well-respected scholarly outlets.”*

That does not sound necessarily suspicious. But it does raise such questions as: How reliable is a survey that is only beginning to be used by peer-reviewed publications?

Gorski and Perry’s data is more troubling than Whitehead and Perry’s. They use the Public Discourse and Ethics Survey but do not include the results in the book except for roughly 20 charts placed throughout the text. To find the regression tables upon which the charts are based, Gorski and Perry inform readers that the tables are available at the authors’ department webpages (Yale and Oklahoma, respectively). Neither professor’s webpage includes the survey, and an email exchange in April with one author instructed me to ask the other author, who did not reply.

As a historian who does not use surveys or tables, I am not sure how normal these seemingly less-than-transparent methods are.

D.G. Hart teaches history at Hillsdale College and is the author most recently of *Benjamin Franklin: Cultural Protestant*.



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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Gertrude Himmelfarb: Historian of the Liberal Paradox

by YUVAL LEVIN

INTELLECTUAL HISTORIANS can serve their societies as guides in wayward times. If they are willing to look at the past not as a primitive patchwork of error and sin, but as an arena of human action free of the present's particular prejudices, they can learn to see in their own time and place what is invisible to their contemporaries.

Lord Acton may be the highest exemplar of such a historian in our tradition. But it was Acton's most profound 20th century interpreter, the great American historian Gertrude Himmelfarb (1922–2019), who best described this mode of scholarship, and best understood what it might offer us today.

Born in Brooklyn to Russian Jewish parents, nothing about Himmelfarb's background or early education quite explains why she became fascinated by the intellectual life of Victorian Britain. But by the age of 28, and married by then to Irving Kristol (whose own path to intellectual greatness was only beginning), she had completed a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago and determined that Acton would be her first great subject.

Her dissertation was soon published as *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics*. And it established at that early age the set of interests and concerns that would dominate Himmelfarb's work for the subsequent seven decades.

She found Acton and other leading Victorians particularly instructive regarding what she termed "the paradox of liberalism"—the idea that, in prioritizing individual liberty above all other political goods, modern liberalism threatened to undermine the moral foundations of individual liberty, and therefore of its own strength.

Acton was a keen student of this problem, and he understood it to be rooted in an ideal of the individual that had its merits but was frequently taken too far. His answer was not to abandon liberalism but

to insist that it be tethered to traditional religion, to the benefit of both. "The liberals wanted political freedom at the expense of the church," Himmelfarb wrote, "and the traditional Catholics wanted the church at the expense of political freedom. Acton knew that in a non-Catholic state the church's freedom could only be guaranteed by a free society so that people who wanted religious freedom needed to be friends of genuine liberal freedom." But he also knew that they needed to insist that religious freedom was a fundamentally communal freedom, and therefore that liberal societies must be made aware of more than individual liberties and prerogatives.

The relevance of this insight for our own time is all too clear. But for Himmelfarb, too, writing in the early 1950s, Acton offered a powerfully compelling case for both the necessity and the limits of the liberal order, and for the need to root it in pre-liberal truths.

It was not only Acton who offered a model of how this might work. Victorian Britain more generally stood as a powerful example, and Himmelfarb devoted herself to exploring the character of that era.

At first this work took the form of powerful, compelling essays written over two decades (and collected in *Victorian Minds: A Study of Intellectuals in Crisis and Ideologies in Transition*, published in 1968) and of three extensive intellectual biographies—of Acton (in 1952), Charles Darwin (in 1959), and John Stuart Mill (in 1974).

It was at the end of her extraordinary study of Mill that Himmelfarb gave clearest expression to the worry she could never shake. As she put it:

Having made an absolute of liberty and having established the individual as sovereign, the liberal

has no integrated view of the individual in society which can moderate either his passion for liberty or his desire for regulation and control. When liberty proves inadequate, government rushes in. And since the only function assigned to government by the principle of liberty is the negative one of protection against injury, when government is obliged to assume a positive role, neither its proper powers nor its proper limits have been defined. The paradox is inevitable: government tends to become unlimited when liberty itself is thought to be unlimited. The paradox brings others in its wake. While contemporary liberalism has enormously enhanced the roles of society, government, and the state, it has provided them with no principles of legitimacy.

The result is a recipe for social breakdown and political disillusionment—for what Himmelfarb termed “de-moralization.” It is a recipe she feared our society had set out to follow.

At that point, in the middle of the 1970s, Himmelfarb began to take a turn that mirrored the one Acton had taken. She went from being a historian of Victorian moralism to being also a Victorian-style moralist in her own time and place. That does not mean that she became a political activist. Her work retained the character of historical scholarship. But she came to think that the moral renewal achieved by Victorian Britain had some distinct lessons for her contemporaries, and she set out to analyze that achievement.

The Victorians had not merely spent moral capital amassed in prior ages. They had actually built up such capital themselves, through a moral and religious revolution of their own and also through intellectual exertions that could inform their successors.

So how had they done it? The Victorians, Himmelfarb argued, had essentially invented the modern concept of poverty, understood not simply as a social fact but as a moral problem that demanded the attention of society. This demand was answered both with a moral code (which emphasized

responsibility) and with what we would now call a policy agenda (which emphasized compassion). And the two combined to “moralize” the politics of the Victorian age in a way that did enormous good not only for the poor as the larger society came to embrace the market economy.

“Compassion” was the most original of the essential concepts of this intellectual revolution. Drawing on Methodism and on the Scottish Enlightenment and its English evangelists, it combined sympathy and moral ambition in a way that ultimately added up to an entire social vision that turned out to be uniquely capable of powering renewal.

Himmelfarb’s work on this front proved exceptionally influential. Under its guidance, that portion of the American right inclined to insist on the moral character of political debates made compassion its watchword and emphasized moral culture—and especially marriage, childbearing, religion, and community—as a necessary complement to the market economy. George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” was only the most obvious example, but the influence of this mode of thought is apparent over decades in every form of the conservative recoil from the (often-caricatured) libertarian framework of the right’s economic thinking. It is plainly present in today’s debates, even if their participants have not heard of Himmelfarb.

Over more than 70 years of engaging, careful scholarship, Gertrude Himmelfarb not only enabled us to know the Victorians far better; she also made it possible for us to answer the ever-present fear of irrevocable decline with a model of the replenishment of moral capital—and so of the possibility of renewal. A historian with moral clarity and purpose, her influence will continue to reverberate for as long as liberalism’s future depends upon its friendly critics. **RL**

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The Flawed Greatness of Thomas Jefferson

The third president of the United States is another victim of our era's small-minded rage against the very idea that imperfect men can still be heroes—and that we badly need such heroes.

by WILFRED M. MCCLAY

IT IS ALWAYS HARD to know where to begin with Thomas Jefferson—or where to end. In that respect, he is not that different from a great many other talented political figures in our history. The politician's art all but requires a talent for enigma, an ability to draw in disparate followers and factions while remaining mysterious, un-pin-down-able, containing worlds of seeming contradiction within both public image and private life. Think of the tangled moral complexity of men like Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, or Martin Luther King Jr., for example. In each of those cases, and there are a great many more that could be adduced, one must find a way to account

for extraordinary moral lapses in careers that were generally successful, built around high ideals that largely benefited the nation.

That this moral tangle was especially characteristic of Jefferson has long been so undeniable as to be axiomatic. His illustrious public career as an American statesman and visionary spokesman for the American experiment in self-government, as a man whose words have inspired peoples all over the world, has to be balanced against a private life that had such grievous faults that they have, in recent years, threatened to bury his reputation entirely. It was not that long ago that the biggest annual fundraising

event in the life of local Democratic parties was called the Jefferson-Jackson dinner, named after two of the uncontested stars of the party's early history, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Now... not so much. The dinners are still being held, but the names have been changed. Jefferson and Jackson have gone from being partisan heroes to being *personae non gratae*. Even one of Jefferson's incontestable virtues, his sterling record as an advocate for free speech and intellectual inquiry, has come into bad odor, as the academy, and even the American Civil Liberties Union, has soured on the ideal of free expression and turned against it.

What a fall from historiographical grace there has been. Jefferson's early biographer James Parton described him in 1775—one year before he wrote the Declaration of Independence—as “a gentleman of thirty-two, who could calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet, and play the violin.” And at that point in his life, he was just getting warmed up. The spirit of Parton's words was still alive as recently as April 29, 1962, when President John F. Kennedy, in welcoming a group of Nobel Prize winners to a dinner in their honor at the White House, uttered the following words: “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House—with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

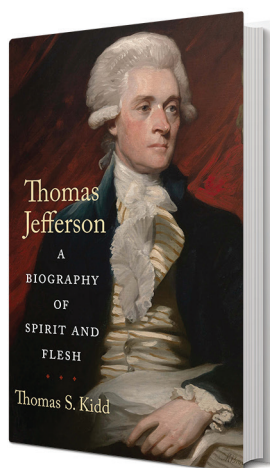
But no such admiration was in evidence in Charlottesville, when Black Lives Matter protesters placed a black shroud over the statue of Jefferson in front of the Rotunda, or in Portland, Oregon,

where mobs used axes and ropes to topple a statue of Jefferson, or in New York, where a statue of Jefferson was removed from City Hall. What a difference a half-century makes! And yet, leaving aside the lawless destructiveness of a great many of the protesters, it cannot be doubted that their protests were in part a product of a sea-change in public opinion, a change that has made Kennedy's unrestrained admiration for the man far less tenable. Only a small part of this change has occurred because of new discoveries about Jefferson's life. More of it has come from a changed moral perspective about faults of which we already knew, particularly relating to his ambivalent attitude toward slavery, an institution he criticized severely but from which he was not willing to extricate himself personally. The charge of hypocrisy does not seem unwarranted.

So how do we reckon the balance and arrive at a just assessment of the man? That is the task Thomas Kidd has set for himself in this lucid, balanced, and searching account of Jefferson's life and of the contradictions he lived out. One of our finest and most prolific historians of early America, Kidd is especially well known for his important work in the history of early American religion, especially evangelical Protestantism, and his biographical accounts of such figures as George Whitefield, Patrick Henry, and Benjamin Franklin. He is attuned to the religious universe of the times and is able to show how a figure like Jefferson, despite the insistence of generations of historians on associating him with deism, atheism, and other departures from orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, was deeply affected by the religious currents of his day and wrestled with questions of faith and providence far more often and far more deeply than the conventional view of him would suggest. His Jefferson is, if possible, even more complex than any Jefferson we have had before. I would place this book alongside the truly magnificent full-scale biography of Jefferson by John Boles, *Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty*, and the excellent scholarship of Kevin R.C. Gutzman, as an indispensable guide to the understanding of Mr. Jefferson, the American *polytropos*.

A COMPLICATED MAN

Again, where should we begin in assessing this complicated man? Should we start by recounting his political accomplishments over four decades of public service, ranging from his entry into the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1769 to his retirement from



Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh

By Thomas S. Kidd
(Yale University
Press, 2022)

public life in 1809, after two terms as the third president of the United States?

Or do we stress instead his influence in the world of ideas, through his powerful writings in support of American independence—the greatest of these being, of course, the Declaration of Independence itself, with its stirring invocation of the God-given rights of every individual human being—words that changed the course of human history and continue to do so today?

Or his card-carrying status as a figure of the Enlightenment, with a keen and unflagging interest in natural science, as evidenced by his service as president of the American Philosophical Society from 1797 to 1815, years that overlap his entire tenure as president of the United States?

Or his love of architecture, as embodied in the graceful neoclassical home Monticello that he designed and built for himself near his Virginia birthplace on what was then the western edge of settlement?

Not to mention his overwhelming passion for gadgetry, which invariably impresses visitors to Monticello, who nearly always remember the revolving bookstand, the dumbwaiter, the copying machine, the automatic double doors, the Great Clock, the triple-sash window, and countless other gizmos that the ever-inventive Jefferson himself either designed or adapted.

“
**OF HOW MANY OTHER
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”



Monticello in Virginia

And what about his founding of the University of Virginia in nearby Charlottesville, whose serenely beautiful central campus he also designed? Or his great contributions to the cause of religious and intellectual liberty, which for him were essential to the dignity of the individual person and central to the work of a great university?

Should we stress the fact that Jefferson, that inveterate designer, even designed his own tombstone and specified the only things it was to say about his life: that he wrote the Declaration and Virginia's Statute of Religious Freedom, and that he was Father of the University of Virginia? Of how many other men can it be said that their having served two full terms as president of the United States—which I think we all agree is no shabby achievement!—was in the second or third tier of their accomplishments?

Kidd gives adequate attention to all these marks of distinction in Jefferson's life. But the underlying spirit of his account of Jefferson is more critical, more insistent that his failings should be highlighted more than they have tended to be in the past. Hence we begin his book hearing primarily about Jefferson's complexity, his contradictions, his shortcomings, the negative aspects of Jefferson's life and career that simply cannot be denied or wished away. Let us recollect what those undeniable shortcomings were.

No one can deny that, although Jefferson opposed slavery in theory, he consistently failed to oppose it in practice, including notably in the conduct of his own life at Monticello.

Roll of the negroes Nov. 1795, and where to be settled for the year 1796.

Manchester.	Shadwell.	Prestford.
James 12, 3 Jan. 80	Squire abt 79	James Holland
Martha 55	Pelinda abt 79	Cate 16, 28, 80
James 65	Forry 77	Reynolds 74
Peter 70	Peter 75	Reynolds abt.
Lucy (James') 80	Squire 79 Dec 1	N. James 74
Enoch 80	James	Manna 76 Oct
James 87, Apr. 23	Phoebe 80	Elizabeth 80, March
Sally 73	Sally 79	Sarah 80, June
Net 80	Sally 78, Aug 1	W. James 91, Sep 1
William 82	John 79, Feb	W. James
Polly Brown 59	Pragwell 68	Abner
Wendell 81	Wendell 70	Sally 79, Nov
Wendell abt. Dec. 80	Wendell 70 Jan 1	Sally Nov
Wendell 80 Dec 10	Mary 80 Oct 29	James 79 Oct 97
Wendell 80 Dec 6	William 93, May 8	John 80 Oct
William 83, Nov 1	Claydon 80	James 80, Feb
Polly Henning abt 55	Claydon 77	Thomas 80
George	William 73	Thomas 78
Ann abt 59	Richard 76 Nov	James 65
George 59	James 65	Wendell 80 Dec 1
James 79, Dec 1, March	Sarah 67, Dec 1	Sarah 67, Sep 18th
Moses 79	Sarah 67, Oct 19	Cassius 79
William 82	Sarah abt 67 97	C. J. abt 90
Wendell 82, May 2		Sally (Pats') 74 Nov
Polly 82 Sep		James 80, Sep
James 80 abt		Stephen 94
Will 80		Wendell abt 55
James 82		Pats
James 85		William 80
James abt 80		William 80, March
W. H. James		William 80, June
William 79		William 80, Nov
Phell, Mary, John		Thomas 80, Dec
Shadwell 80		Thomas 80, Jan
Cate abt 55		Thomas 80, Feb
Mingo		Thomas 80, Mar
Pats 79, Feb		Thomas 80, Apr
Pats 79, Apr 1		Thomas 80, May
Lucy 81		Thomas 80, June
Agnes, Will abt 84		Thomas 80, July
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Jefferson's 1795 Farm Book listing 163 slaves at Monticello

No one can deny that Jefferson's racial views, particularly as expressed in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, are appalling by today's standards.

No one can deny that Jefferson often practiced a very harsh brand of politics. His famously conciliatory words “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists” in his First Inaugural Address were quickly belied by his ferocious partisanship, which was relentlessly aimed at stigmatizing the Federalist Party and driving it out of existence. Up until the election of 1800, the principal figures in American political life had hoped (foolishly, as soon became clear) that the country could escape the scourge of partisan politics. But no one made the party system work with more ruthless efficiency than Jefferson. He embraced the role of party leader and, unlike Washington and Adams, appointed only men of his own party to the top Cabinet positions. Over the two terms of his presidency, he had great success in establishing Republican dominance and putting the Federalist Party out of business.

Nor can one deny that his greatest act as president, the Louisiana Purchase, and his worst, the Embargo Act, both represented a complete repudiation of his most basic principles about the dangers of big government and strong executive authority.

He could hardly be described as a man of firm and invariant principles.

These are not small flaws, nor are they the only ones. Kidd especially insists that we take more seriously the corrupting influence of Jefferson's personal lifestyle, which was dependent not only upon slavery but the sexual exploitation of the enslaved, including his relationship with Sally Hemings, by whom it is alleged (and the allegation remains contested) that he fathered children. And Jefferson's lavish personal spending, in contrast to his budget-tightening approach to public policy, was one of the factors that ensured his dependence upon the institution of slavery and made him ever less able even to consider manumitting his slaves. Kidd ends his book with a bleak depiction of what became of Jefferson's little world once he had departed it. He had spent like a drunken sailor and made no provision for the future. I don't think any of Jefferson's biographers has made a better case for the need to take these personal failings much more seriously than we have. I am persuaded that Kidd is right to insist on it.

IMPERFECT HEROES

Still, if I have a criticism of this fine book, it would be that its moral acuity sometimes shades, ever so slightly, into present-minded moralism. It is hard to resist the temptation to judge Jefferson by our own standards. What makes him morally culpable in our eyes is the fact that we can see that he knew better. He was living at a moment of profound transition in the moral sensibility of the world, and it is small wonder that he could be advanced far beyond his times in some respects and retrograde in others.

Jefferson is, I believe, one of the principal victims of our era's small-minded rage against the very idea that imperfect men can still be heroes—and that we badly need such heroes. (And furthermore, that imperfect human beings are the only heroes we can ever hope to have. There is nothing else on offer!) We have been living through an era that feels compelled to cut the storied past down to the size of the tabloid present—and then to cancel it altogether. The time has come for this self-congratulatory myopia to change.

For when all is said and done, Thomas Jefferson deserves to be remembered and revered as a great intellect and great patriot, whose worldwide influence, from Beijing to Lhasa to Kiev to Prague, has been incalculable, and whose belief in the dignity and unrealized potential to be found in the minds

and hearts of ordinary people is at the core of what is greatest in the American democratic experiment. It is in this sense that James Parton was absolutely correct in making the following proclamation: "If Jefferson is wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right."

Of course, we want to know more than Jefferson's words; we want to feel that we know the man himself. But that is exceptionally hard with Jefferson. He eludes our grasp. He may well have been the shyest man ever to occupy the office of president, awkward and taciturn except in small and convivial settings, such as small dinner parties, where he could feel at his ease and shed some of his reticence.

He loathed public speaking, giving only two major speeches while president, and none on the campaign trail. He often felt that the work of politics ran against his nature and complained that the presidency was an office of "splendid misery," which "brings nothing but increasing drudgery & daily loss of friends."

Add to that the fact that he had more than a little bit of the recluse in him. Twice he withdrew entirely from public life, first in the 1780s, after a disappointing term as governor of Virginia, then at the conclusion of his presidency, when he left Washington disgusted and exhausted, anxious to be rid of the place. As he wrote a friend, "Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power." Never was he happier than when ensconced in his Monticello retreat, his "portico facing the wilderness" that he loved and found renewal in. This was a most complicated man.

A MAN OF MANY LETTERS

At bottom, I think Jefferson is best understood as a man of letters. Literally. Jefferson wrote almost 20,000 letters in his lifetime, and it is in these letters that he seems to have felt freest and most fully himself. Although he complained to John Adams that he suffered "under the persecution of letters," the opposite seems to have been the case. This was a man who lived much of his life inside his own head, and it is in these letters that he comes most fully alive for us. He seems to have needed the buffer of letters interposed between himself and the world; but with that buffer in place, the otherwise awkward and taciturn Jefferson became more open, wonderfully expressive and responsive to his correspondents. As Kidd observes, he was probably too open and too expressive in his correspondence, more imprudent

than his cautious friend Madison, and some of the contradictions between and among his letters are particularly attributable to the enthusiasm with which he approached the task of letter writing. In this aspect, Jefferson can seem especially appealing.

The correspondence is always very personal, very much directed toward the particular correspondent. Which is one reason why his thinking was different in different places. It was in his letters to Maria Cosway, for example, that we glimpse his passionate nature and the struggles between head and heart that preoccupied much of his inner life. It is in his letters to his nephew Peter Carr that we see his thoughts as a preceptor and wise guide to the world's ways. And it was in his magnificent correspondence with his old rival John Adams, a dialogue that spanned 50 years until their deaths in 1826, that Jefferson most fully explored the deeper meaning of the American experiment. He was constantly using his correspondence to organize and sharpen his thinking, and it is there that we see him most fully and vividly.

In any event, it is for his ideas, above all else, that we honor Jefferson, and for the cause of human freedom and human dignity that he so eloquently championed. His failings may weigh against the man, but not against the cause for which he labored so mightily. That should be a lesson to us today. Like Jefferson, we are carriers of meanings far larger than we know, meanings whose full realization cannot be achieved in our lifetime, or even be fully understood by us, but which we are nevertheless charged to carry forward as faithfully as we can.

But unlike Jefferson, we have the benefit of being able to stand on his shoulders, with his words to direct and inspire us. "We knew" about Jefferson's faults, said the late Representative and civil rights leader John Lewis. "But we didn't put the emphasis there. We put the emphasis on what he wrote in the Declaration. ... His words were so powerful. His words became the blueprint, the guideline for us to follow. From those words you have the fountain."

It is the same fountain that today nourishes our lives and shows no sign of running dry. Today is a good day to drink from it anew. And, if you like, also to say, "We are all Jeffersonians." Because, in fact, we are. **RL**

Wilfred M. McClay is the Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization at Hillsdale College, where he is also professor of history.



February 23, 2023 | 12:00pm-4:00pm

BUSINESS MATTERS 2023

Business Matters, Acton Institute's premier event on business, ethics, and faith, returns on February 23, 2023, from 12:00pm-4:00pm Eastern Time.

In the midst of the Great Resignation, finding and retaining the right employees is testing businesses. How can businesses build the kind of culture that attracts talent? How will this challenge be affected by what many predict will be an upcoming recession? Should remote work be resisted or embraced? Hear from a slate of top entrepreneurs and experts on how they are addressing these crucial issues. Business Matters is unlike any other event on business, presenting a unique synthesis of business insight, economics, and moral grounding.

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Thirty-five-year-old Billy Graham returns to the U.S. in 1950, after a five-month "Crusade for Christ" touring seven European countries. Photo by Bettmann/Getty Images.

The Cult of Celebrity in the Church of Christ

In the wake of multiple scandals that have rocked the evangelical world, from Mars Hill to Hillsong, the role of the celebrity pastor has come in for intense scrutiny. Why be faithful when you can be fabulous?

by MIKE COSPER

IN A PROFILE for *The Guardian* from 2012, Kim Kardashian was perplexed. "When I hear people say [what are you famous for], I want to say, 'what are you talking about?'... I have a hit TV show. We've shot more episodes than *I Love Lucy*!"

Emma Brockes, the journalist who wrote the *Guardian* profile, was just as perplexed as Kim. She spends most of the 3,000-word essay trying to make sense of *why* her star was on the rise. She finally asks directly:

"What is my talent?" [Kim replies.] She cocks her head to one side. "Well, a bear can juggle and stand

on a ball and he's talented, but he's not famous. Do you know what I mean?"

This might be the perfect distillation of what it means to be a celebrity in the 21st century. In many ways, Kim was the trailblazer—a star of the reality-TV era who successfully expanded her influence into not only fashion, television, and film, but also law, politics, and as of April of 2022, private equity.

That model of influence has a deep history in American culture, with parallels in the church, and understanding its impact on evangelicalism is the subject of Katelyn Beaty's new book, *Celebrities*



Billy Graham with President Ronald Reagan and the First Lady, Nancy Reagan, at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1981

for Jesus: *How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church*. She distinguishes celebrity (what Kardashian enjoys) from fame as understood in previous eras. Fame “is a by-product of virtue, the effect rather than the goal of living a virtuous life.... It is at its finest when it comes to those who are not seeking it.” Celebrity, on the other hand, is defined not by great deeds or virtue but rather by the “celebration” of an individual. “It’s similar to fame,” she writes, “but doesn’t require doing anything of particular importance, talent, or virtue.”

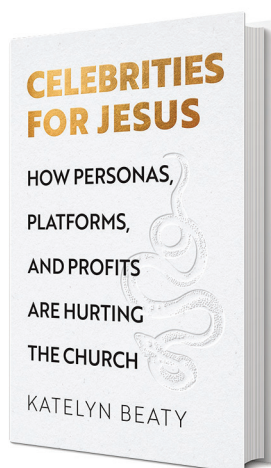
To translate Kardashian’s comments into Beaty’s framework, the juggling bear might actually *be* famous, but Kim is a *celebrity*.

Beaty has written a book that manages to be both thorough and concise, providing an impressive overview of evangelical celebrity with a blend of journalism, cultural criticism, and pastoral theology. Readers will walk away not only with a sense of the phenomenon’s history and problems but also the seeds of how pastors might reimagine their role in the modern church.

AMERICA’S PASTOR?

Beaty’s treatment of Billy Graham illustrates the care she takes to tell this story soberly and fairly. Graham was the first and most significant evangelical celebrity and deliberately chose mass media as a tool for ministry, wielding authority with what Beaty describes as “charisma, passion, and communicative power.” He was eminently watchable, with a rugged all-American handsomeness, a dash of Southern charm, and above all else, a profound sense of earnestness and urgency. Graham didn’t want your money; he wanted to make sure you didn’t go to hell.

His ministry avoided most of the pitfalls that would sink future Christian celebrities, but Beaty cites Neal Postman’s observation that his embrace of



*Celebrities for Jesus:
How Personas,
Platforms, and
Profits Are Hurting
the Church*

By Katelyn Beaty
(Brazos Press, 2022)



Mars Hill Bible Church in Seattle

mass media was an indicator of “gross technological naivete.” His reputation as “America’s Pastor” is a significant example of how much he transformed our spiritual imaginations. Beaty writes: “America’s Pastor isn’t quite the right name for Graham. A pastor is a shepherd of souls, and to shepherd a soul, you have to know a soul.”

But she also notes important ways Graham distinguishes himself from much of the celebrity culture that followed. He worked with local churches, funneling converts into communities that could shepherd them. He formed a board that set his salary and committed to never exaggerate attendance or conversion numbers. And, perhaps most importantly, he invested in institutions “that didn’t need or depend on his gifts or charisma to succeed,” including the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, and my own employer, *Christianity Today*.

“Graham saw with prescient wisdom how intoxicating it would be for leaders to believe they are so important they can evade the accountability they

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**BILLY GRAHAM DIDN’T
 WANT YOUR MONEY; HE
 WANTED TO MAKE SURE
 YOU DIDN’T GO TO HELL.**
 ”



Hillsong Church’s United performance in 2005

need,” Beaty writes, “even and perhaps especially when their work seems crucial for the kingdom.” As much as the word *evangelical* has been distorted, she says, a character like Graham makes abandoning it altogether difficult. When asked if the label applies to her, Beaty answers, “It’s complicated... If an evangelical is defined as ‘anyone who likes Billy Graham,’ as biographer George Marsden famously quipped, I guess I’m in. I quite like Billy Graham.”

She maintains a sense of affection for the evangelical movement throughout the book, which is no mean feat at a time when many of the incentives lie in the direction of writing a jeremiad. I felt that pressure while reporting and producing the podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* and received no small amount of criticism for refusing to throw specific theological tribes, evangelicalism, and even Christianity itself under the bus. Doing so would have simplified a problem that is much more complex. I found myself thinking often of Hanlon’s law: “Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.” To expand that a bit, there is a difference between malevolence, foolishness, and thoughtlessness, and much of the weirdness of evangelical celebrity culture—including some of its corrupted attributes—belong to the latter two.

“Celebrity...is a worldly form of power and evaluation of human worth,” Beaty asserts. “It is not a spiritually neutral tool that can be picked up and put down, even for godly projects. The moment celebrity is adopted and adapted for otherwise noble purposes—sharing the good news and inviting others into rich kingdom life—it changes the project. And it changes us.” Matthew Crawford’s concept of cultural jigs is helpful here. These are structures of ideas and incentives that form desires and behavior. They

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WE NEED TO REINVIGORATE THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN THE CHURCH, AND THAT MAY MEAN REVITALIZING AND EMPOWERING DENOMINATIONS.

”

operate without much thought or active participation, which means they are incipient and dangerous. The cultural jig that inclines one toward celebrity gave us Kim Kardashian. It also gave us Carl Lentz, the fallen pastor from Hillsong New York who in addition to having committed adultery has been accused of all manner of spiritual abuse.

Similarly, the jig that formed him has formed hundreds of imitators in churches across the country—men and women (though mostly men) who might not have the same malevolent inclinations as Lentz but have come to believe that embodying an influencer image is the best way to reach their neighbors for Jesus. If that's the case, their error isn't narcissistic self-indulgence; it's a failure to think and judge.

This is why Beaty's book is so necessary and why her tone of familial affection is so helpful. By not taking an outsider's stance or shouting, “Burn it all down!” she makes bridge building possible and presents herself as a concerned guide that might help wrongheaded leaders to “think what we are doing” (to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase).

THE WEIRDNESS OF EVANGELICAL CULTURE

The book concludes with a few directional ideas for leaders who want to avoid celebrity culture's errors or bring reform. One of evangelicalism's mistakes from the very beginning was grandiosity, and it strikes me as dangerously tempting to address at this moment even more of it—demanding the church “burn down”

or “gouge out” the trappings of celebrity and entertainment in ways that both indulge a grandiose spirit (“We're the new reformation!”) and lack realism. They remind me of parents shouting at their children to eat their broccoli; they might get them to do it, but they won't get them to love it.

Beaty, however, emphasizes spiritual formation and spiritual friendship, pursuits that can't turn the ship overnight, but that's precisely the point. Change is likely to be small, slow, and local. Mustard seeds, not spectacles.

I found myself laughing at many points while reading the book. Beaty was developing her project in parallel with my own *Mars Hill*, and without ever talking about it or comparing notes, we ended up covering many of the same historical inflection points and problems. As I reflected on Beaty's book, I found very little to disagree with, but several ideas that I think need deeper consideration for the sake of the church.

One is the phenomenology of celebrity. Evangelical culture is weird in part because American culture is weird, and success in almost any work in the public sphere will result in some degree of celebrity. Tim Keller, founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, is an interesting case study. He was influential for a long time inside a small circle of Presbyterians and church planters, but in the mid-2000s, a post-9/11 attentiveness to New York City, a church-planting boom, and a neo-Calvinist movement expanded that circle to a global platform. Today he's one of evangelicalism's most well-known figures.

In *Celebrities for Jesus*, Beaty distinguishes celebrity—the ability to sustain “celebration” in the public sphere—from fame—the renown that comes from virtue or meaningful contribution to the common good. Keller's appearance in the public sphere is certainly due to the latter, but today he experiences many of the trappings of the former. If he walks into certain rooms, he will get mobbed by fans who want him to sign books and take pictures. Celebrity wasn't something he pursued, but rather it *happened to him*.

I'm also interested in the need for institutions in any efforts at reform. Beaty connects Yuval Levin's work to her own—how weakened institutions have lost their ability to form their constituents, instead becoming platforms for celebrity. (One might say they no longer function as the cultural jigs they once were.) One significant piece of evidence is the prominence of nondenominational evangelical megachurches, which make up the majority of growing churches in the U.S.

An important thread in *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* was the way that church shifted its bylaws over the years, moving the center of power so that it gave Mark Driscoll an increasingly free hand and softer accountability. By contrast, Billy Graham (as Katelyn Beaty points out in *Celebrities for Jesus*) invested in institutions from which he enjoyed no benefit. Moreover, as his ministry became more influential, he established institutional safeguards around it and submitted to them. It seems to me that we need to reinvigorate the role of institutions in the church, and that may mean revitalizing and empowering denominations, or it may mean establishing new institutions—ones that actually function.

Lastly, I think we need a deeper exploration of the role of the inner life in these conversations. There's a great deal of literature on the psychological aspects of this phenomenon in churches, and Beaty touches on one of the better ones in her discussion with Chuck DeGroat, author of *When Narcissism Comes to Church*. But to borrow from Charles Taylor, we need to understand the extent to which the disenchanting effects of modernity have closed off spiritual

experience and communion with God, sending us in pursuit of meaning within the world.

THE PERILS OF THE IMPOVERISHED INNER LIFE

In *Celebrities for Jesus*, Beaty references what is one of my favorite explorations of the subject: a 1975 speech by Hannah Arendt, given in acceptance of the Sonning Prize.

For as much as she was a public intellectual, Arendt did not consider herself a public figure. She wanted her work to speak for itself; by winning the Sonning Prize, she was stepping into the public sphere in a way that was deeply uncomfortable for her.

The entire speech is extraordinary. In it Arendt describes how life requires us to put on personas, performing as it were the roles assigned to us—mother, father, teacher, doctor, husband, etc.—not because any one of them is necessarily false, but because our nature is much more complex than any one of them. We appear in these roles, but they do not and cannot express the whole of who we are, and certainly not our inner life.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church founder Tim Keller, 2006



Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)





A Baptist megachurch in Dallas

This strikes me as one of the most essential challenges for Christian leaders. Arendt was uniquely attuned to the ways modernity had impoverished the inner life, as well as the premodern resources that once invigorated it. Her Ph.D. thesis was about love in the work of Saint Augustine, and in an essay called “Augustine and Protestantism,” she describes how one of the great contributions of *The Confessions* was that it opened up the “inner empire of the soul.” Augustine gave readers a way to think about their thinking, their inner conditions, their desires and wants. Modernity turned the lights out on that inner realm, sending individuals out into the world in search of other sources of insight and meaning.

For Arendt, this impoverished inner life is at the root of much of the 20th century’s evil; robbed of the capacity to look inward, we find ourselves also incapable of thinking and judging. It is a short trip from the loss of thought and judgment to participation in atrocities—be they mass genocide (her primary topic) or enabling spiritual abuse (the topic I’ve been devoted to for several years). Like the problem of celebrity, we find ourselves dealing with a phenomenological reality: The world we live in forms people in this way. But unlike reforming the problem of celebrity, reinvigorating our inner life isn’t out of reach—especially for a church with a rich heritage of contemplative practices.

There are direct implications that flow from this to the practices of evangelical churches, especially evangelical worship services. There is prescience in James K.A. Smith’s description of megachurch gatherings: a Coldplay concert followed by a TED talk from “the smartest guy in the room.” The description fits well with Beaty’s work—these gatherings create

an artifice of celebrity even inside the closed system of an individual church, and perhaps they’re effective because celebrity itself feels transcendent.

RENEWAL AND INNOVATION

If evangelicalism is to experience renewal in the years to come, it will have to reckon with the ways it has been enculturated and oriented around celebrity, and Beaty’s book is an essential contribution to the conversation that needs to happen. And as much as we might critique evangelical culture, there is much in its history and practice worth mining—especially its spirit of innovation. So while we need to reach into the broader church’s tradition, looking for practices that can invigorate the inner life of our communities, we also need the resources of our own tradition to find fresh language and fresh ideas for embodying them.

We need to awaken to the devastation that has been left in the wake of the evil, foolishness, and stupidity of the past several decades, and I think Beaty’s book is an important contribution to that end. My prayer and hope is that on the other side of that awakening, we can remain both sober and affectionate as we seek renewal. As Cormac McCarthy put it in *The Road*, “When one has nothing left make ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.” **RL**

Mike Cospoer is the director of CT Media and the producer of Christianity Today’s podcast The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. He’s the author of several books, including Recapturing the Wonder and Faith Among the Faithless.



Once One People of One Book

Is it possible to build a national identity on a single book?
Renowned scholar Mark A. Noll continues his exploration of
evangelical Christianity's singular attachment to Holy Writ and its
effect on 19th-century American life, in war and peace.

by THOMAS S. KIDD

MARK A. NOLL, PROFESSOR emeritus of history at the University of Notre Dame, is among the most prolific and accomplished historians of American religion ever. I once imagined that the 2002 book *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* was Noll's magnum opus. With the recent appearance of *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911*, I am no longer sure whether to view *America's God* as a standalone volume or as a sort of companion to *America's Book*. In any case, Noll has shown himself capable of extending and even accelerating his scholarly output well into his 70s. Noll has the proverbial fire in his bones; he can't suppress his desire to understand the complex relationship between Christianity and American history.

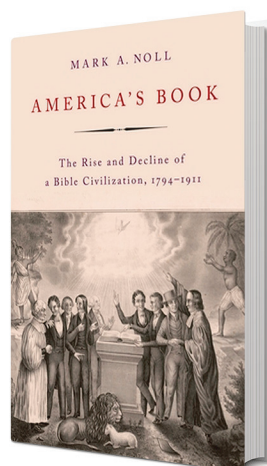
A more recent companion volume in Noll's vast corpus is *In the Beginning Was the Word*, his 2015 history of the Bible in colonial and revolutionary America. But that book (comparatively slender at 431 pages, compared to 846 for *America's Book* and 622 for *America's God*) now seems more like a prelude to *America's Book*. *In the Beginning* explained how the Bible became a distinctly American volume, which readers approached through the lenses of republican ideology and commonsense literalism. Not coincidentally, these intellectual trends profoundly shaped the Revolution, too. *America's God*, as its subtitle ("from Edwards to Lincoln") suggests, covered the same chronological range as *In the Beginning* and *America's Book*. But *America's God* was more of an

intellectual history of theologians and politicians than *America's Book* is. I expected Noll to cover a lot of the same ground in *America's Book* as he did in *America's God*, and he does so to a certain extent. But *America's Book* is more of a social and cultural history of the “rise and decline” of America’s “Bible civilization” than a tracing of elite theologians’ ideas about the Bible and America. Having established the “Christian republicanism” argument of *America's God*, Noll examines the on-the-ground fate of that idea in *America's Book*. Both books (like all of Noll’s works) fully reward close readings.

Indeed, such readings are essential for anyone needing to establish basic scholarly familiarity with American religious history before World War I. Noll seems to have read and digested virtually every scholarly work on the Bible and religion in the 19th century. He presents a synthesis of that literature in *America's Book*, explaining on a grand scale and with considerable ambivalence what it all means. Noll, with characteristic generosity, credits the multitude of authors upon which he draws. For the general reader, this recitation of scholars’ names could make the reading tedious at times, especially given the daunting length of the book. But the blizzard of authors cited and the rich details of the wide-ranging account reflect Noll’s conscientiousness and his passion for the subject. If these qualities don’t make his book “beach reading,” that’s a fault born out of the author’s manifold virtues.

DISESTABLISHMENT AND VOLUNTARISM

America’s Bible civilization, for Noll, was a product of several interlocking theological, ideological, and cultural developments. One was the smooth (if morally and doctrinally problematic) synthesis between American Protestantism and the republican/democratic ideology of the American Revolution. Even non-orthodox figures such as Thomas Jefferson had no problem affirming (as he did in his First Inaugural Address) that America’s “benign religion” was moral ballast for its republican polity. Another component of the Bible civilization, ironically, was the disestablishment of the state churches. Disestablishment made the voluntaristic, Bible-centered religion of the reading believer the norm in America in ways it had not been in the Old World. The turn to voluntarism and Bible-centeredness did not happen automatically or without hard work. It was driven by upstart



America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794-1911

By Mark A. Noll
(Oxford University Press, 2022)

Protestant denominations, especially Methodists and Baptists, which came to dominate the American religious landscape by the antebellum period.

Even the Northern-dominated old denominations, especially the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, reacted to disestablishment by forging new voluntaristic agencies dedicated to Christian “custodial” influence in American society. Among the most significant agencies, for Noll’s purposes, was the American Bible Society, founded in New York City in 1816. The ABS and many similar organizations did not quite make Bible owning and study as ubiquitous in America as they had hoped. But they did make the individual Bible reader—not just Bible-preaching churches—a foundation of American religion. The Bible civilization was populated by millions of people who had access to the Bible in more immediate ways than perhaps any people ever before.

But what precisely did the Bible *do* in that civilization? What purposes did it serve? Even in the heyday of Noll’s Bible civilization, the answers were not clear. Many such as Jefferson saw the Bible as a means (hopefully) of inculcating virtues such as love of neighbor. Salvation and personal holiness were not of much interest to such observers. They were mainly concerned about religion’s pragmatic value in a republic, which would collapse if “the people” proved to be craven and selfish.

But for the millions of Americans influenced by evangelical religion during the “Second Great Awakening,” salvation and holiness were chief among the reasons for treasuring the Bible. Noll doesn’t regard the Second Great Awakening as an event so much as an extended process in which an unusually



Methodist camp meeting, 1819

high percentage of Protestant Americans, both whites and Blacks, came under the influence of evangelical faith. In that faith, Bible preaching and Bible reading were preeminent practices. In the “organizing process” (to use scholar Donald Mathews’ term) of evangelical growth, Methodism was the main event. The Methodists, writes Noll, “were the shock troops who did the most to secure the unquestioned preeminence of Scripture in post-Christendom America.” There’s irony in the Methodist story, too. The Bible civilization was doomed to run aground upon intra-Protestant political disagreements, culminating in the Civil War. But early Methodists were, to Noll, almost entirely apolitical. In other words, politics was going to destroy America’s Bible civilization, but the denomination that most effectively built that civilization was largely indifferent to politics, at least during its time of peak growth.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE APOLITICAL

Noll identifies Nathan Hatch’s 1989 classic *The Democratization of American Christianity* as one of his most important influences, but Noll’s early Methodists come off as looking far less influenced by American democratic ideology than Hatch’s did. Perhaps this is because Noll assumes that many Methodist leaders (especially by the early 1800s) accepted the ideals of republicanism, despite their lack of engagement in electoral politics. Yet Noll is struck by how Methodists were (charmingly, from a contemporary perspective) oblivious to elections and generally unimpressed by political leaders. My favorite example comes from Francis Asbury, the key figure in the establishing of the Methodist movement

in America. Asbury met George Washington in 1789 while in New York City for the Methodists’ state annual conference. In his published journal, which Asbury used to mentor Methodists and publicize their churches, he simply did not mention meeting the new president. Instead, he talked about his sermon at the annual conference (on Isaiah 25:6, “And in this mountain shall the Lord of Hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things”). Can you imagine a pastor or priest today meeting the president and not telling people about it? For Asbury, partisan concerns were subordinated to his spiritual mission.

This spiritualized “Methodistic” bent among rank-and-file evangelicals is missed by many scholars today. Some polemical writers now seem to regard white evangelicals in American history merely as Donald Trump voters in waiting. But Noll, with his typical nuance, realizes that while the temptations of politics are powerful ones, most evangelicals are not evangelicals *because* of politics. Evangelicals in American history would have generally explained their faith as rooted in God’s gracious offer of salvation through Christ. Salvation and Scripture, furthermore, introduced them to God’s plans for holy living and godly flourishing. At least until the passage of the women’s suffrage amendment in 1920, a strong majority of American evangelicals were not directly involved in partisan politics. Many had opinions about politics or were involved in moral-reform movements with political implications (such as temperance or anti-slavery). But we should look other places besides just partisan politics to comprehend what made the average evangelical an evangelical.

Yet Noll knows that even an apolitical stance can be ethically problematic. (Evangelicals’ critics, of course, are not so much upset with them for being political but for having the *wrong* politics and associated cultural views.) Being apolitical in the face of the crises over slavery in America was a dereliction of moral duty. Sure, being apolitical was better than being pro-slavery (which many Southern evangelicals were). But touting the “spirituality of the church” as an excuse to check out of politics in the midst of debates over slavery wasn’t a palatable option either (from a modern perspective). It seems that to “stop being political” is not quite the answer to the undue politicization of evangelicals or religious people of other persuasions. Still, Noll ably demonstrates what made early national evangelicals tick when he notes that their faith—particularly Methodists’ faith—was rigorously spiritual, sometimes to the neglect of political concerns.

ARGUING SLAVERY

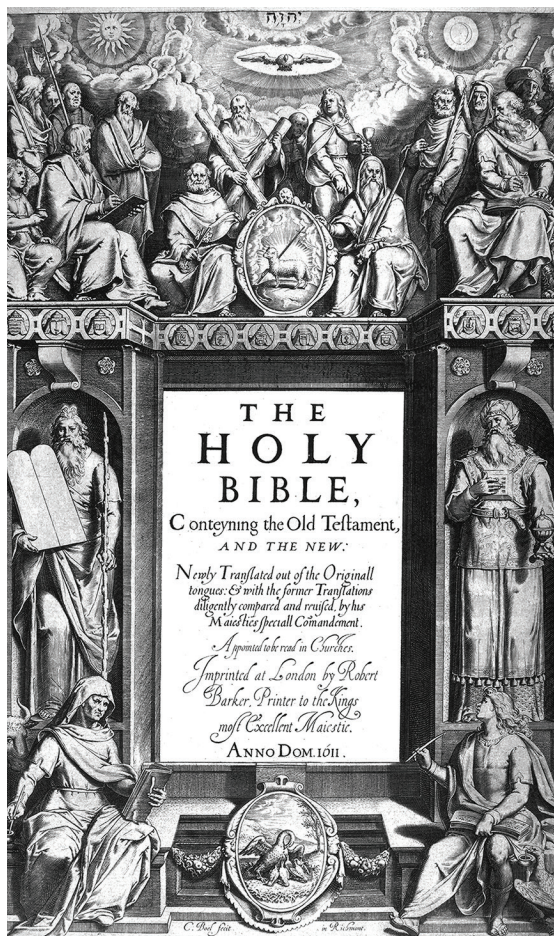
But politics was on the rise, even for the Methodists. The dissolution of the national Methodist and Baptist denominations over slavery in the mid-1840s signaled the beginning of the end of the American Bible civilization, according to Noll. National schisms and war demonstrated that Protestants' ironclad confidence in the perspicuity of Scripture had somehow failed in the matter of slavery. If this was the great moral question of the age, why couldn't Protestants agree what the Bible taught about slavery? Sometimes evangelicals were able to maintain civility in debates over slavery, but more often both pro- and anti-slavery advocates descended to accusing the other side of dishonesty. Noll, following scholars such as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, once believed that the pro-slavery side actually had the better argument in the proof-texting biblical

wars of the antebellum era. Given the literalistic assumptions of most white Bible readers, it was hard to get around verses such as "Slaves obey your masters" (Eph. 6:5, Col. 3:22). But Noll now thinks that even in the context of antebellum Bible culture, the anti-slavery side had the stronger argument. Echoing earlier points in *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (2006), Noll notes that the U.S. was "just about the only place in the entire Christian world" where the pro-slavery biblical argument was found persuasive. The unwillingness to consider one's faith and biblical interpretations in global historic context fueled white Christian Southerners' self-deception. In any case, if Americans had agreed on what the Bible taught about slavery, there would have been no Civil War. Instead, Bible readers and preachers only inflamed the national furor, leading to the destruction of the Baptist and Methodist denominations, and ultimately to the nation's greatest ordeal in secession and war.

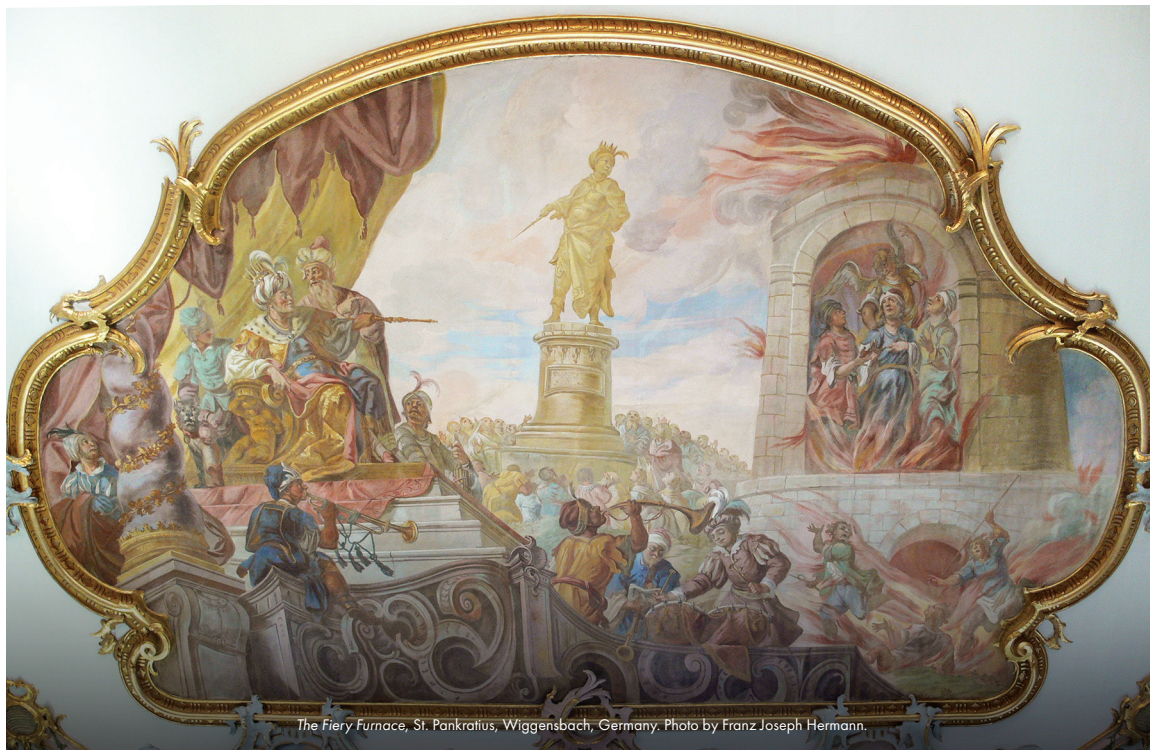
Then, in the mid-to-late-19th century, America saw a massive increase in Catholic and Jewish immigration. Demographically, the nation's Bible readers were far more diverse in 1900 than they had been in 1850. Catholics, Jews, and different varieties of Protestants took foundationally different approaches to Scripture. Protestants, the historic champions of *sola scriptura*, revealed the incommensurateness of modernist and fundamentalist readings of the Bible by the time of 1911's commemorations of the 300th anniversary of the King James Bible.

By the early 20th century, the Bible had taken on a familiar place in broader American culture. The sacred book remained ubiquitous in believers' personal devotions and in the steady drumbeat of Sunday sermons. It came to the fore in times of national crisis, suffering, or mourning. (More recently, one thinks of President Barack Obama reading the whole of Psalm 46 on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.) But the idea of the Bible actually framing public policy, or serving as a basis for American cohesion and virtue, had become mostly a nostalgic dream. That dream retained power mainly for those who looked back on the antebellum Bible civilization and concluded that America was once, and still should be, a Christian nation. **RL**

The title page to the 1611 King James Bible



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The Fiery Furnace, St. Pankratius, Wiggensbach, Germany. Photo by franz Joseph Hermann.

Christian Pluralism as a Way of Loving

An Anglican theologian gives us an uplifting perspective on religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and living peaceably with our non-Christian neighbors.

by JORDAN J. BALLOR

THE EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN theologian Michael F. Bird provides a clear-eyed and charitable vision of the current state of religious liberty in the Western world. Working from Australia, but with a keen eye on developments elsewhere and particularly in America, Bird's offering provides both a framework for evaluating the contemporary situation as well as a call for Christians to promote the need for religious liberty more responsibly. Bird's book is a helpful point of departure for engaging the challenges and opportunities for Christians to protect religious liberty today, and in so doing promote a free and flourishing society.

Bird opens his treatment with a memorable invocation of the courage of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three Hebrews living in exile in Babylon who were faced with death if they refused to worship

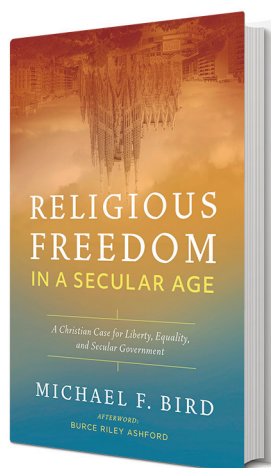
Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. As we read in the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar threatens the men: "But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" The men respond: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Dan. 3:15–18).

But if not. In those three words the three would-be martyrs summarize their faith in God to be faithful, in his own way and in his own time. "They believed that God would save them," writes Bird, "*but if not*, they would never bow down and worship the image of the

self-acclaiming, self-gratifying, and self-aggrandizing tyrant.” Bird’s project in *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age* is best understood as a charitable, generous, and indeed even *winsome* effort to articulate faithful Christian discipleship in a fractured age. “We need faith in the firmness of our convictions,” writes Bird, “that our heavenly Father is mighty and will deliver us, *but if not*, we will not bow down and worship the gods of sex, the idols of greed, or the demons of xenophobia, nor prostrate ourselves before the pantheon of false gods and their empty promises.” One of the moving epitaphs with which Bird opens the volume is from Francis Cardinal George: “I expect to die in my bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.” Bird wants desperately to help us avoid that possible future. *But if not*, then Christians must choose the path of faithfulness even if it leads to marginalization, suffering, and oppression.

PEACEABLE LIFE TOGETHER

And yet Christians are not to seek out conflict. Here the words of the Apostle Paul echo: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Bird’s constructive proposal develops in three broad sweeps. First, he interrogates the concept of *secularism*, distinguishing different forms and arguing that not all versions of what often pass for secularism are equally antagonistic to Christian belief. Second, he explores the significance of religious freedom and its salience for today, with particular attention to the challenge from sexual and gender anti-discrimination movements and ideologies. And



Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government

By Michael F. Bird
(Zondervan, 2022)

“**WHAT BIRD DESCRIBES AS ‘MILITANT SECULARISM’ IS NOT AN ‘EMPTY SHRINE.’ IT IS, RATHER, A SOCIETY WITH NO SHRINE AT ALL.**”

third, Bird concludes with a vision of what he calls “the Thessalonian option” and the role of apologetics for defending religious liberty and the Christian faith in a secular age.

The path of peace that Bird attempts to walk is between two extremes: secular progressivism and nativist nationalism. As he puts it: “It is one thing to worry about protecting religious freedom from the hyper-secularist policies of the progressive left, but equally worrisome is how the religious right and politicians with nationalist agendas can weaponize religious freedom in service of xenophobia and homophobia.”

Some may scoff at the equivalency of the dangers presented here. After all, one can hardly imagine a Christian flag flying above an American embassy, for example, while Pride flags are seemingly ubiquitous, from the U.S. embassy to the Vatican to the doors of woke Christian college professors to the commercials of seemingly every business in the country. If both sides are equally dangerous to authentic Christian witness, then only one side seems in any real danger of winning.

And yet we perhaps ought not be too quick to reject the reality of the dangers of both extremes. Even if Christian nationalism is ill-defined and, in many cases, merely a fringe phenomenon, the temptation to grasp the levers of political power even as cultural and spiritual influence declines is all too common and all too tempting. If Bird errs in presenting a kind of moral equivalency here, he does so in an attempt to chart a safe course through two very real temptations. He chooses, to use a popular contemporary metaphor, neither the blue nor the red pill.

And the goal is to find a way to live peaceably together amid deep, and even divisive, disagreement. The true choice, as Bird describes it, is between civil society and civil war:

The political extremities of the left and right pose an existential threat not only to religious freedom but to the very concept of a civil society itself. If our societies are not civil, if we do not accept that we sometimes lose, if we do not place limits on our political rhetoric, if we do not respect the rule of law, if we do not call out violence and fake news by our side, then we will slowly descend into civil conflict of a more chilling variety.

SECULARISM, TRUE AND FALSE

A key element of Bird's project is to distinguish between versions of secularism and between secularism and secularization. There are better and worse forms of secularism, or better yet true and false versions. Bird favors what might be called classic or even Christian secularism. This is a kind of secularism arising out of firm and even traditional convictions about the human person—inspired if not informed by Christian anthropology. This variety of secularism is conducive to pluralism and civil peace. Thus, Bird contends, “secularism establishes appropriate spaces for religion to be pursued and performed,” even as it “establishes spaces that are deliberately desacralized to make them common to all, irrespective of someone's faith or lack of faith.”

This kind of “benign” secularism “is not against religion, but about common spaces that are neutral, nonsectarian, and free of religious affiliation.” We might be reminded here of Michael Novak's metaphor of the empty shrine, which he used 40 years ago to describe “a genuinely pluralistic society” in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. “That shrine is left empty,” argued Novak, “in the knowledge that no one word, image, or symbol is worthy of what all seek there. Its emptiness, therefore, represents the transcendence which is approached by free consciences from a virtually infinite number of directions.”

To extend Novak's metaphor, what Bird describes as “militant secularism” is not an “empty shrine.” It is, rather, a society with no shrine at all, because anything evocative of transcendence is opposed and overthrown with totalitarian force. “Secularism as manifested in the separation of church and state



Harvey Cox (1929–)

is good for a tolerant, pluralistic, and democratic state,” writes Bird. But “militant models of secularism require a state to intervene in people's religion precisely to keep it a private matter and publicly invisible.” Bird's distinction between true and false forms of secularism mirrors a distinction made cogently by Hunter Baker in *The End of Secularism*, which disambiguates the institutional separation of church and state from a more thoroughgoing and “militant” secularism.

That modern prophet of secularism himself Harvey Cox warned in *The Secular City* about this latter kind of secularism. Bird invokes Cox's warning that militant secularism “menaces the openness and freedom secularization has produced; it must therefore be watched carefully to prevent its becoming the ideology of a new establishment. It must especially be checked where it pretends not to be a world-view but nonetheless seeks to impose its ideology through the organs of the state.” Bird laments in something of an understatement: “I think Cox's warnings are coming to fruition.”

THE ESTABLISHMENT IDEOLOGY

And what precisely is “the ideology of a new establishment,” to use Cox's phrase? Certainly one feature of modern secularism is its virulent hostility to religion, at least religion that is not gelded of public virility.

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But the new establishment cannot be defined simply by what it is against. Rather, it must be interrogated in terms of what it stands for, what it promotes, protects, and in some sense demands devotion to. In this regard, Carl Trueman's exposition of the revolutionary implications and consequences of “expressive individualism,” particularly in its expressions of sexual and gender identity, provide a compelling narrative of the rise of the new establishment ideology.

And it is not sufficient, of course, for such an ideology to come to merely cultural or social expression. It must manifest itself in the use and transformation of political power, or what James Poulos has evocatively termed “the pink police state.” Bird spends considerable time examining what he calls “an intractable and entrenched series of legal conflicts over competing rights and freedoms related to religious communities and LGBTQI+ identities.” Bird is correct to observe that such battles “are stoked by religious leaders, journalists, lobbyists, activists, bureaucrats, and politicians.” And this is true for those on all sides of every issue of our current culture warring. There are grifters and hucksters and profiteers to be found everywhere. Sex sells, and so does a sexualized culture war.

Bird argues for a détente in this sexualized culture war, one that allows for sexual orientation and gender identity civil rights that have been recognized thus far to continue to be respected, even while the rights of religious people to demur from participating in certain kinds of activities is likewise respected. This kind of compromise is perhaps the only fruitful way forward, at least in the short term. It is also,

unfortunately, unlikely. This is in part because the momentum is squarely on the side of cultural progressives and sexual transgressives, and also in part because there is little incentive for either side to compromise. “We must remember that freedom of conscience means the freedom of all consciences, not just the ones we happen to agree with,” observes Bird. It is true that we ought to remember this. But this is a difficult reality to recall when one is in the intoxicating position of cultural superiority and political dominance.

**NEITHER QUIETISM NOR
TRIUMPHALISM**

Bird is concerned to promote “the idea of a diverse and pluralistic society where well-rounded freedoms of religion, conscience, and association are safeguarded yet not weaponized against sexual minorities.” Ideas are important and, indeed, have consequences. We must also argue for the idea that the establishment ideology should not be weaponized against religious minorities in increasingly militantly secularized societies.

But ideas are not all that matter, and this is where Bird's apologetic emphases are strongest. Bird reminds Christians that a faithful response to an increasingly aggressive and hostile secularism is not an equally virulent and pugnacious Christianity. Rather, the best response might be to suffer in expectant hope. *But if not.* Bird's proposed model, the “Thessalonian strategy,” calls for neither quietism nor triumphalism. “It is no overstatement to say that love is the most potent weapon we have in our arsenal to show that Christian faith makes people better, it offers a better way of being human, and it mingles perfectly with other virtues like faith and hope. Christ's way of love constitutes a more humane worldview to live by.”

One might quibble or even disagree with details of Bird's analysis, his weighing of the pressing dangers of the day, or the prudence of his proposed strategy. But careful readers will come away from this volume with an appreciation for a principled Christian commitment to pluralism and religious liberty as a way of loving. And that is no small thing, especially in this secular age. **RL**

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



Illustration by Jan Luyken depicting Origen teaching his students (1700)

Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers

The biblical exegesis of the church fathers is often dismissed as fanciful or based on poor translations. A CoFE minister and research scholar sets the record straight and reintroduces the church to the earliest interpretations of Holy Writ.

by **RICHARD TURNBULL**

GERALD BRAY ENJOYS a rich résumé: research professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama, where he taught from 1993 to 2006; ordained minister of the Church of England; director of research for the Latimer Trust. He has published on the patristic period and wider matters of church history, systematic theology, and Anglicanism. In *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible*, Bray does the church further service by providing an imaginative and insightful overview of the approach of the church fathers to scripture. He does so in an engaging and incisive way by telling the story of the fathers from an angle rarely discussed, opening up these foundational

figures in new ways, neither eulogizing the patristic period nor underplaying their continued importance for today. He reminds us of some important insights with a few unexpected truths along the way.

The first chapter, entitled “What Is Patristic Biblical Interpretation,” focuses on who the church fathers were and what Bible they actually used, and reminds us of several important facts. The church fathers are regarded as authoritative in some way yet may appear daunting or impenetrable. This is especially so in respect of what appears at times rather spectacular approaches to biblical interpretation. Yet once we understand their cultural and historical

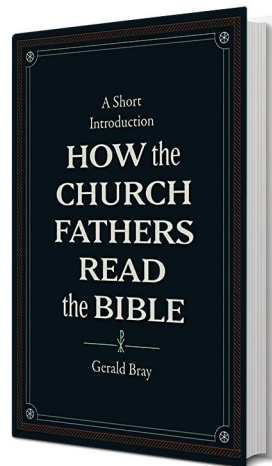
“

ORIGEN WAS THE FIRST CHRISTIAN TO WRITE A HERMENEUTICAL TREATISE, DEVELOPING THREE SENSES IN INTERPRETATION THAT CORRESPONDED TO THE DIVISION OF BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT.

”

context and their relationship to the text of scripture, we are better equipped to appreciate the fathers' approach and learn lessons for today. "Students of the early church have come to appreciate just how central the Bible was to its concerns," writes Bray, "and that, whether we agree with the fathers or not, the interpretative principles that guided them must be taken seriously if we are ever to understand how Christianity developed."

Bray spends significant time, probably too much, reflecting on the actual nature of the Bible in the hands of the fathers. The key point he is seeking to make is that they simply did not possess the same Bible most of us do and that we need to take that into account in assessing the manner in which they read and interpreted the text. Few of them were familiar with Hebrew, and they relied upon the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), rather than the Hebrew Bible. Bray helpfully points out the extent to which the LXX contains features not found in any original Hebrew text. Throughout the book, he is skillful at dropping into the narrative interesting, if little known, facts. In the LXX, the books of the Torah are known by the titles that we recognize today, whereas in the Hebrew manuscripts they are known simply by their opening word. The LXX also contains the Apocrypha, though that name was first applied by Jerome in the fourth century. Jeremiah is much shorter in the LXX than in the



How the Church Fathers Read the Bible: A Short Introduction

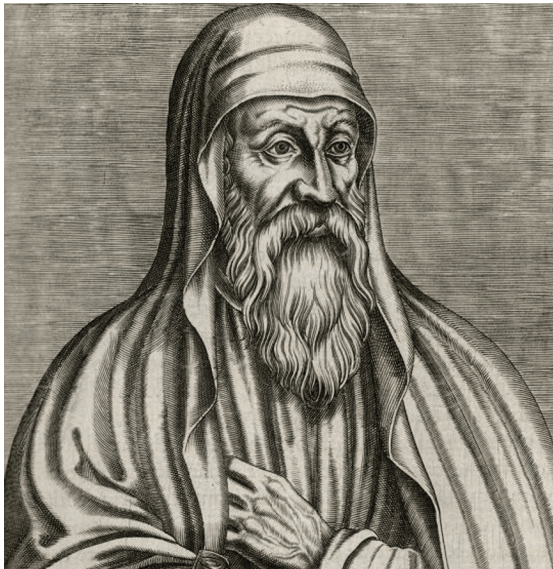
By Gerald Bray
(Lexham Press, 2022)

Hebrew, whereas Esther and Daniel are longer, presumably due to later additions. There are various issues of categorization, and the Psalms are numbered differently. The inadequacies of the LXX did come to be recognized, but that was the text that, for the most part, the fathers had before them. In contrast, the New Testament manuscripts were a little easier to collate. Bray also draws attention to the format of the Bible, not least the fact that there was not a single "book" ("the Bible") but various codices, as well as a lack of verse and chapter divisions. Most likely, even "great men like Augustine probably did not possess a complete set of codices, at least not personally." In other words, the fathers did not have before them the same books in the same form most of us have in our Bibles.

In his discussion as to who exactly the church fathers were, Bray makes the point that many of those who were later declared doctrinally heterodox (Arius, Pelagius) were seen as competent and orthodox Bible interpreters in their day. Complicating the picture are significant and brilliant figures such as Origen who were later condemned. The complexity of the period is further illustrated when we're reminded that schismatics such as the Donatist Tyconius found his interpretative methods accepted by the great opponent of Donatism, St. Augustine!

THE PROBLEM OF ALLEGORY

The patristic period traditionally extends from the second century to the fifth. Bray is willing to include Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) and the Venerable Bede (ca. 673–735) among the fathers, which may be



Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253)

a stretch. What Bray is telling us, however, is that when it comes to interpretations of the scriptures, the boundaries of the fathers have to be extended in terms of both traditional orthodoxy and geography. Some parts of his broader exploration of the fathers in the Greek East and the Latin West are probably better suited to a basic early church history than this volume on scripture, but that is a minor quibble.

The second chapter, entitled “The Clash of Worldviews,” is in my view the weakest. We are given an extensive and admittedly interesting treatment of the way pagans, Jews, and Christians clashed in their interpretations of both Bible and philosophy. But this rather lengthy excursus, though important, only delays our arrival at the heart of the matter under debate, the way the church fathers interpreted and handled scripture.

When we finally arrive at this, however, in chapters 3 and 4, we are not disappointed. According to Bray, Origen was the first Christian to write a hermeneutical treatise, developing three senses in interpretation that corresponded to the division of body, mind, and spirit. The bodily sense, perhaps the most obvious meaning of a passage, serves primarily to convict the reader of sin. The moral sense was given to enable the Christian to grow in virtue so that we may see Christ. The challenge was to the soul to seek higher things. To some degree, both these senses were inadequate and required the spiritual sense, to enable the reader to appreciate and understand that which was

revealed only to those who possessed the indwelling Spirit. A fourth sense was later added by John Cassian (360–435), effectively dividing the spiritual into two parts, one related to this life and the other to the life to come.

As Origen and others after him sought to harmonize these different senses, problems became evident. The particular danger of the spiritual sense was obscure and fanciful interpretations. Bray says that Origen “let his imagination run away with him” in his detailed spiritualization of the people, the animals, and the rooms on the ark, for example. It was this approach to spiritualization and the use of allegory in interpretation that have come to characterize how we view patristic readings of the Bible. That does not mean, writes Bray, that they lack wisdom and value.

Origen and the fathers who followed his lead may have misinterpreted their texts and indulged in fanciful comparisons that fail to meet the standards of interpretation that we would now expect, but there is usually a kernel—and often much more than that—of truth in what they have to say, and if that kernel can be rescued and recycled, it is worth doing.

There is nevertheless an increasing reluctance to embrace the allegorical method as employed by Origen but without rejecting the approach completely. Bray gives the example of Eustathius of Antioch (died ca. 360), who critiqued Origen’s allegorization of 1 Sam. 28:1–25 (Saul and the Witch of Endor) on the grounds the passage made perfect sense as it stood. The Latin father Augustine, of course, was not beyond developing allegorical or spiritualizing interpretations, but Bray argues that “he was neither a literalist nor an allegorist but a pastor”—a useful reminder of one of the primary purposes of interpretation in the first place.

At this point one is desperate for some practical examples of the fathers at work. How *exactly* did they interpret particular passages? Bray offers us 10 examples, and we can focus on one, the aforementioned 1 Sam. 28, when the Witch of Endor appears to summon Samuel up out of the earth. Origen wondered how it was possible for a medium to have such power over a prophet. He believed that it was indeed Samuel, for to think otherwise would doubt the accuracy of the Bible, but it was hard to explain why Samuel was in hell. For Origen, the story was ultimately that “there was nowhere that did not need the saving presence

of Christ, and the prophets went to hell in order to proclaim that message.” Justin Martyr noted that Satanic influence over us did not end at death, Tertullian that the power of the witch to summon up Samuel was real but unique. Origen’s view prevailed, and was taken even further by Augustine, who suggested that God could indeed send the dead to speak truth to the living.

A JOURNEY WORTH TAKING

All told, Bray is honest and realistic in his assessment of the fathers. Early on he notes that the “fathers were honored for their teaching, not for their method(s) of interpreting the Bible.” Yet he seriously helps us to understand the fathers as well as the strengths and weaknesses of their interpretive method. He notes that it “seems strange to modern readers that some of the best-known parts of the Bible were often passed over by ancient commentators,” observing that the early fathers “saw little need to write commentaries on the Old Testament books of Samuel and Kings ... not because the books were rejected as Scripture but

because their meaning was thought to be too obvious to need further explanation.”

This is the strength of Bray’s short introduction: its breadth and depth of insight. He does not gloss over difficulties but helps us along the way in our journey with the fathers. For that we should be most thankful to him. This was a fascinating read: the fathers from a new and different perspective.

Bray sums up his work by reminding us of the basic principles and truths the fathers embraced: They understood the place, role, and importance of scripture. They were not perfect, but we have much to learn from them, nevertheless. **RL**

Rev. Dr. Richard Turnbull is director of the Centre for Enterprise, Markets, and Ethics and a trustee of the Christian Institute. He holds a degree in economics and accounting and also holds a Ph.D. in theology from the University of Durham. He was ordained into the ministry of the Church of England in 1994. Rev. Turnbull is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a visiting professor at St. Mary’s University, Twickenham.

The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul by William Blake (c. 1800)





The Neo-Latinate Imagination of Joseph Bottum

A new book of poetry is the culmination of years of elegant prose and wise counsel from a writer-editor of capacious learning and tender feeling.

by JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

JOSEPH BOTTUM HAS long been known for his elegant prose style, omnivorous literary allusiveness, and cultural critic's eye for what we know, what we think we know, and the sometimes embarrassing gap between those things. His decades of editorial work for *The Weekly Standard* and *First Things* guided both those organs through their great ages of growth from political and religious magazines to eclectic and spirited journals of cultural review. Less known is that Bottum's first book was a collection of poems and that he has published poetry and songs here and there ever since. *The Fall and Other Poems* appeared in 2001; a book of songs, *The Second Spring*, in 2011;

and now, two decades on, Bottum has published his second full-length collection, *Spending the Winter*.

The virtues of his prose, which are on their most impressive display in his study of post-Christian America, *An Anxious Age* (2014), as one might expect, translate well into verse. Consider these lines from the title poem of his first book, which captures the colors of autumn in New England:

New England comes to flower dying.
Leaves like broken petals train
in fluttered rage from tainted trees.
The year grows willful. Stagnant ponds

strain to clamber quarry walls.
Time slips indenture, backing age
on fuddled age, confusing fall
with summer—snow with hawthorn flurries,
apple flakes along black boughs.

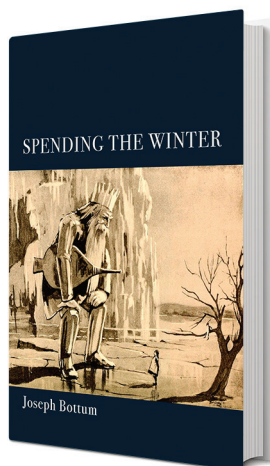
Consider also this stanza from the early “Timor Mortis,” which shows Bottum’s talent for the rough and heavy rhythms of song:

The flinch of the doe
as she drinks at the river,
The twitch of the owl
the flutter of mice:
Death is the sudden
Shrill in the shiver,
The shudder, the stutter
the stand-still of night.

The freedom of the poem to be a thing apart from any argument frequently allows Bottum to indulge his taste for the musical but also the grand, ornate, and classical, as in these lines loosely translating one of Horace’s odes:

Once we drop below the west and
eyeless judges carve their stone decrees,
nor righteousness nor noble birth nor skill
with words restores our day to light.

In the final poem of his first book, he writes in a similar mode to his mentor, the late Reverend Richard John Neuhaus, pleading the case of art and poetry in a milieu consumed with the great life issues of our day, abortion and assisted suicide:



*Spending the
Winter: A Poetry
Collection*

By Joseph Bottum
(St. Augustine’s Press,
2022)

If I have seen geese low on the east horizon,
seen the long reeds strain in the dawn to follow,
watched the first clean ice of the season
take roots for the winter,
what worth are those hard scenes in a day that
fathers lunge at half-born sons with a knife, and
daughters name the swift-gained deaths of their
mothers high gestures of mercy?

In passages such as these, we find that Bottum has a fine ear for the strong rhythms of song, an eye for the vivid phrasing that rekindles familiar details, and finally a voice blessed with a classical clarity that can speak of public and private matters, of death and politics alike.

All those qualities have been retained and improved in *Spending the Winter*, a volume that was clearly the work of many years while its author was spending much of his time at other things. The effect is a collection of poems with an assured voice, a great variety of forms and subjects, but one where the poems do not necessarily form a whole greater than their parts. The poems themselves come together by the same serendipity that one of Bottum’s epigrams describes:

Worthless things and things of wonder
Are fish in a single lake—
For much of bliss is caught by blunder,
And joy by some mistake.

This is not to say there is no order or unity to the volume. We begin in spring, at Easter, and his daughter, Faith, appears in the poems as a young girl. We end with poems that meditate on winter and death (and meanwhile, though it is not mentioned in these pages, Faith has become an editor at the *Wall Street Journal*). The book does take us some place and, indeed, where it takes us is most often to those great classical themes of new life, the shudder of death, and the moral wisdom that may result for those who mark these things well. In the opening poem, “Easter Morning,” Bottum reflects on the new growth of the season:

Quick as dawn, the dogwoods have raised
Improbable awnings, christened with rain.
Thrusts of witch-hazel, stands of rune,
And there—*there*, across the stream,
In the shade of those dark-lichened rocks—
White phlox and geranium strain



Raimundo Correia (1859–1911)

To reach the angled light. One bright
Morning, a clean April day,
Amazes familiar paths with a green
Tangle and baizes the winter's stain.

This stanza contains several of the typical characteristics of Bottum's poetry: a loose tetrameter line that vacillates between speech and song, a frequent but irregular use of rhyme, and an eye for the familiar that finds vivid expression less in the well-observed detail than in the well-turned phrase. As we hear of all that is newly coloring the world, the fresh bloom of his young daughter "runs by the brief flowers." The scene that unfolds has already a certain gravity through the sheer quality of its description, but the "Quick" spring is a reminder that the beautiful changes, and of all that goes wrong in our turning world:

Every spring pretends a pity
For all the pretty, short-lived things.
Last night I watched the fire zones,
The bombers' plumes and tracer rounds,
Blooms of war on the TV news.
And now in these green trees I see
The graves of gods and a grove of bones.

The moment is aphoristic and memorable in its first two lines and vividly realized as a sketch of our new bloody century in the lines that follow.

Even in these two quoted stanzas we find a compelling vision of brief beauty coupled with the

inevitability of finitude and the corruptions of history, but the poem does not idle there. Dedicated to René Girard, the great philosopher of the meaning of sacral sacrifice and communal scapegoating, "Easter Morning" also recounts the ancient sacrifice of priests' attempting, by bloody rite, to "wake" the nature of "the frozen world." Nature is a snare, a vacillation between dormancy and life, death and beauty, all to repeat in a vertiginous and endless cycle. But, suggests Bottum, the "parish bells" of Easter call us beyond the "cold fear" to such a historical vision that will induce to a more permanent kind of "rising, *rising*."

TRANSLATIONS AND IMITATIONS

Other poems in the first part of the volume repeat the theme that "All brightness leans to dark / And doubt." In the next, Bottum's attentions move from birth and death to language and translation. Entitling this part "Imitations," Bottum signals with that word what Robert Lowell and other poets have done before him: craft poems that are either translations or versions of poems from other languages that also serve to reveal something about the character and concerns of the translator himself. Lowell famously translated the opening of Homer's *Iliad* to read "Sing for me, Muse, the mania of Achilles / that cast a thousand sorrows on the Greeks." The choice of "mania" for the Greek word *Fitzgerald* and *Lattimore* both translate blandly as "anger" is closer in sound to Homer but hints at Lowell's own "mania," or mental illness, for which he would be institutionalized at least a dozen times.

Bottum's imitations convey a quieter, subtler kind of reference. A sonnet translated from the Portuguese of Raimundo Correia and an original sonnet dedicated to his Brazilian wife and daughter cleverly suggest Bottum's personal debt to that "final flower of Latin," whose qualities he likens to "a butcher's knife on a bed of satin."

More revealing in their way are four "Englishings of Neo-Latin Hexameter." With the recent publication of A.M. Juster's translation of John Milton's Latin *Elegies*, more widespread attention has been brought to that curious feature of early modern literary culture. We now know and prize its vernacular literatures, from Petrarch to Shakespeare; but not only Milton but George Herbert and many other English poets also composed poems in the lingua franca of the Europe of their day. Those Latin poems have often a different texture from the poets' work in English.



A frozen Thames River, Christmas 1894

More stentorian in tone, general in vocabulary, lacking the colloquial accent of a spoken language, such poems often sound de facto more classical and at just a slight elevation from the terrain of daily life.

Encountering Bottum's English versions of Latin poetry provoked the thought in me that this has always been his own natural idiom. Latinate and aphoristic, sagely observed but—with important exceptions—lacking in the precise observation of minutiae necessary for realism. This becomes especially clear in Bottum's version of William Baker's 1634 "*Descriptio Brumae*":

So Londoners play blustery games,
And leaving a hearth-heated home,
Take to the streets, thronging the squares—
Astray from their day jobs to roam

In search of fresh sport, jostling to join
Tomfoolery's revels and show.
Football breaks out—scrums on the idea,
The contest of feet in the snow.

The poem is lovely in its description of a London whose work has been halted by a snowstorm and where forced leisure and reveling are made possible by a frozen Thames. It shows all from about the same eye level as a Bruegel the Elder painting. It also recollects some of Bottum's own writings on his South Dakota homeland. Further, the poem captures the

general, the typical, and the essential, rather than the specific or peculiar.

His translation of George Buchanan is almost as compelling. Buchanan writes from his posting in Portugal of his longing for Paris, and one hears faintly in the background Bottum's nostalgia for his years in the eastern metropolises of the United States. "The Transit of Venus" captures the astronomer Jeremiah Horrocks' somewhat contrived longing for the planet of love:

Why do you flee, Beautiful One,
Abandoning lovers and friends?
Why must you leave, why go astray,
Concealing the gift of your face?

Finally, "Epitaph for a Dog," a very loose version of Vincent Bourne's 1724 "*Epitaphium in Canem*," reminds us that certain kinds of sentimentality and humor have been with us for centuries and never quite grow old.

The neo-Latin style is, I think, that of most of Bottum's poems, which generally try to sum up the typical, to lead the particular toward the universal and the moral level of things. In his first book, the desire to be aphoristic and to rise above the particular leaves some of the poems feeling like experiments in archaic poetic poses and subjects; the poems "Diaspora," "Black Scrawl," and "Song" sound a bit like the nostalgic medievalism of John Keats or the early Ezra

Pound. But, in translating early modern Latin, Bottum pays homage to the older styles that inform his while also making it distinctly modern in the “Englishing.”

MUSIC AND METER

It is not only in their themes that these poems are revelatory. Bottum’s practice of poetry hovers always close to music and song. In English, our paradigmatic line is the iambic pentameter. The five-stress line is flexible enough to be musical when needed, but it can also accommodate the plainest speech and the most ornate and golden rhetoric. Bottum’s poems are usually one metrical foot shorter, in some sort of loose or tight tetrameter or trimeter. Tetrameter is the language of ballad and song, of music almost to the exclusion of rhetoric.

The eccentric metrical choices of Bottum’s translations—which he appropriately names “Choriamb and Trisyllabics”—help us to hear the heavy musical rhythm of these otherwise classical and rhetorical poems. A choriamb is a classical metrical foot that, in English, would indicate two stressed syllables surrounding two unstressed ones; by “trisyllabics,” Bottum seems to mean an anapestic trimeter. I shall illustrate his meter by quoting a stanza from the Buchanan translation with the stressed syllables in bold:

How **often** I’ve **asked** seabirds in **flight**
For **news** of my **distant** desire.
Far **Paris**, my **love**, **city** of **light**—
The **sweet** *Marianne* of my **song**...

“
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”

The remainder of *Spending the Winter* includes a run of witty epigrams, hymns, carols, and light verse, as well as a handful of more serious lyrics. It also includes “Four Seasons: A Graduation Poem,” which Bottum composed as the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Princeton just this last spring. My understanding is that it was this poem that inspired Bottum to gather his poems into a new volume, and rightly so. This poem is the highlight of the book. With its public occasion and classical style, its allusive nods to other poets and writers, its drawing the seasons of life into a unified poetic whole, it shows Bottum’s poetic talent to best advantage. The poem opens with the melancholy vision of the passage of time with which the book itself begins:

God hunts old men out of season,
Winters them before they fall.
Time begins to lose cohesion.
The caller walks behind the call.

And it culminates in the kind of humanist summary vision that redeems melancholy by chastening the spirit. We know that “every change needs something’s dissolution,” such that “freedom of will requires death.” What then? In a return to the more rhetorical iambic pentameter, he concludes:

The fact that all that lives must die
Unburdens us and eases small dismay.
Undoes ambition, greed, the rush of fame.
Unkindness, too: The price of living long
Is burying your parents, teachers, friends.
Be gentle. Everyone you know is dying.

The best books of poetry really do form a whole greater than their parts, and, as I have said, Bottum’s does not. The book is, however, very good. There’s not a bad poem in it. The opening poems possess a great lyric power; the translations are spirited and civilized; the songs beautiful; most importantly, the long graduation poem is at once perceptive, pithy, and wise. He has found a good way to spend the Dakota winter. **RL**

James Matthew Wilson is Cullen Foundation Chair in English literature and the founding director of the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston. An award-winning scholar of philosophical theology and literature, Wilson has written 12 books, most recently Praying the Nicene Creed: I Believe in One God (Catholic Truth Society, 2022).



CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Stephanie Slade, Senior Editor, *Reason Magazine*

Most people equate libertarianism with anarchy, or merely legalized drugs/gambling/prostitution, i.e., vices. How would you define it for the uninitiated?

I define libertarianism as a political philosophy that tells us what the proper role of government is: to protect life, liberty, and property and then to get out of people's way and let them pursue the higher things in life: knowledge, virtue, friendship, etc. Importantly, for me, libertarianism is not a comprehensive moral philosophy. In other words, it can't tell us what those higher things are or how best to *use* our freedom. To answer such non-public-policy-related questions, we have to look outside of libertarianism.

Libertarianism is not known to be all that sympathetic to religion. You appear to be the house Catholic at *Reason* magazine. What tensions with your peers has this created, if any?

None! The ethos of tolerance is so deeply ingrained at *Reason* that my colleagues couldn't be less bothered by what I believe, so long as it doesn't contradict big-tent, small-L libertarian principles. If anything, former editor-in-chief Nick Gillespie and current EIC Katherine Mangu-Ward have pushed me to be more willing to write in the first person about how my religious views interact with my politics. And while I may have been the only practicing Christian

when I started at *Reason* eight years ago, that is no longer the case. Many of our younger staffers are believers these days—thanks be to God!

Do you ever see your faith and especially what is termed Catholic social teaching come into conflict with a focus on market-driven economics? For example, what responsibility does the state bear (if any) in exercising a "preferential option for the poor"? Is there room in the libertarian economic vision for a strong "safety net"?

I'd point readers who are really interested in these questions to a long piece I had the opportunity to publish at *America* magazine back in 2018 called "A Libertarian Case for the Common Good." But the short answer is that there are a number of deep currents within Catholic social teaching, going all the way back to the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, that are perfectly consistent with libertarianism: forceful opposition to socialism, strong support for private property rights, and, importantly, a dogged insistence that individuals and voluntary civil society institutions should be on the frontlines of solving social problems, with government policy (particularly federal policy) as a last resort. Having a robust

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social safety net can actually erode that sense of agency and responsibility that people ought to feel for one another, by conditioning us to believe that whatever can be done to help the least fortunate is already being done by a massive bureaucracy with far more resources at its disposal than we have. It thus makes us *less* virtuous, while all too often exacerbating the underlying problems of family and community breakdown that cause poverty in the first place. We libertarians can and do disagree among ourselves about what kinds of things it's appropriate or prudent for the government to do, but we generally take those risks more seriously than other groups.

Is there room for libertarians in the National Conservative movement, or have they been written out? Or have libertarians written NatCons off?

I think the National Conservatives are still trying to figure out what exactly they stand for. But to the extent that their distinguishing characteristic is what I observed at their big conference this fall—a desire to acquire government power by any means necessary and then wield it to destroy their political enemies—this directly contradicts the libertarian worldview. One of the great lessons of history is the seductiveness of power and the importance of keeping that desire in check, in our hearts and our governments alike. I fear National Conservatism is largely defined by a refusal to accept that that lesson also applies to them.

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

The Chronicles of Narnia. They rocked my world no less during college than when I first encountered them in elementary school. And just last year, I gave them another read and was struck by their many parallels with our current political debates. In the final book, for example, one character is so hungry for power that he unleashes an evil that ends up consuming him. Sound familiar? **RL**

Stephanie Slade is a senior editor at Reason magazine, where she covers the intersection of religion and politics, and a fellow in liberal studies at the Acton Institute. In 2016 she was selected to the Robert Novak Journalism Fellowship. In 2013 she was named a finalist for the Bastiat Prize for Journalism. Follow her on Twitter: @sladesr.

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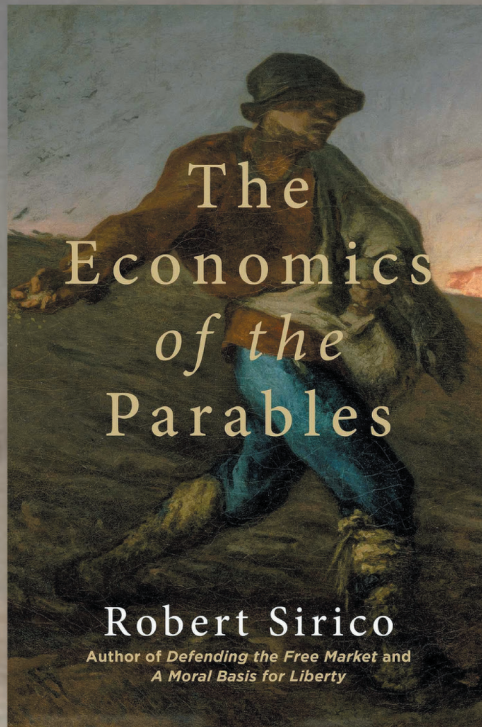
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