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Asceticism & the Consumer Society

An Interview with Metropolitan Jonah
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The Orthodox Church is mostly known in the United States for its rich liturgical life, its adherence to ancient calendars for major Christian feast-days and, perhaps most of all, the many food and ethnic festivals offered by its multi-ethnic parishes. Social activism and moral witness in the public square, not so much. That has begun to change with the rise of Metropolitan Jonah, the primate of the Orthodox Church in America. This youthful bishop, born James Paffhausen in Chicago and raised in Southern California before entering monastic life in Russia, was elected to lead the OCA in November 2008. Since then, he has perhaps been the most widely quoted and covered Orthodox bishop in the United States, speaking out on social issues and traveling widely to speak to ecumenical gatherings. He delivered one of the keynote addresses at Acton University in June 2011. Religion & Liberty Executive Editor John Couretas spoke with Metropolitan Jonah about his talk.

R&L: In your Acton University address, “Asceticism and the Consumer Society,” you explained how the consumerist impulse was really an addictive impulse, something that compels us fill a void where God should be. And we so frequently attempt to fill that empty spot with the wrong things.

Metropolitan Jonah: I think the void occurs because we’re basically distracted from God, and we don’t let God fill that void. We don’t have that focus and that perpetual intuitive awareness of God for which we were created, and so we let other things get in the way. And for many people, it’s pain and disappointment, discouragement, anger, bitterness, all of the passions. For others, it could be the pain that follows from having been abused in some way. And so this becomes a kind of a preoccupation and we look for things to mute that pain, to distract us from it. We look for a salve.

Would you say that these passions, these addictions, have a similar cause?

All addictive behaviors are the same, essentially. They are rooted in the same kind of phenomenon, this avoidance of inner pain. It could be consumerism and a constant preoccupation with acquisition of things, as if more stuff could make us happy. Or it could be the resort to abusing alcohol or drugs or sex in the same way.

In your talk, you offered some reflection on how this distraction not only pulls us away from God, but reduces us to something less than fully human. What is the key to living out our full humanity as Christians in this highly secularized world?

I believe the real key is that whole complex of relationships that we find, first and foremost, in the family and then in the broader community. But our relationship with God, of course, takes priority even before the family. All of our other relationships find their place within that relationship with God, because it’s precisely that which actualizes our personhood. We can be autonomous individuals but that doesn’t mean that we’re authentically persons, in the sense of having that real meaning and vision of our lives rooted in God and rooted in the other. Without God, our personhood becomes a kind of a self definition.

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“Oh for a revival throughout the Confederacy!” exclaimed the editor of the Macon (GA) Daily Telegraph in 1862. The paper was commenting on an outpouring of the Gospel throughout the town, while reporting on food shortages, ordinances, and the latest news from the front lines of the American Civil War. The war’s second season was a reality check for many Southerners as the Federal blockade, inefficiencies of the Confederate government, and devastating casualties of Shiloh and Antietam dimmed the glow of many sunshine secessionists. Austerity fell upon Dixie, and fell hard, and in such times as in other places and in other conflicts, people turned to faith. Indeed revival would soon spread throughout the region; not in the plantations, parlors, or the pews but in the ranks of the Confederate Army. The great revival of 1863 would be a homespun harvest.

The American South was no stranger to religious upheaval. The Second Great Awakening of the early 19th century had sewn a fabric of Protestant Evangelicalism throughout the region. Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist evangelists rode the Southern backcountry preaching to, converting, and baptizing thousands. Prior to the American Revolution, New England had been the “Bible Belt” of America, while church attendance in the South was scant. The Second Great Awakening shifted the culture of Dixie, and America as a whole. The revivals took hold in the “backcountry” amongst the yeoman. Southern evangelism reflected the charismatic and independent character of the Appalachian farmers. Southern yeomen declared their independence from the staid faith of the plantation gentry. While planters dominated politics and business, humbler folk shaped the culture of Southern Sundays. The South’s evangelical turn led to a homogenization of white yeomen. The North went the opposite direction. The 19th century saw Puritanism secularize into transcendentalism and abolitionist politics, while millions of Catholic immigrants changed the face and form of faith in the North’s urban centers. Northern society became a melting pot (if sometimes boiling) while the South became more unified and “peculiar” in its culture. While Union soldiers also turned to God during the Civil War, they did so in a much more hodgepodge fashion; each regiment, each social class, each ethnicity in its own way. The Confederate Army, meanwhile, contained rank upon rank of men of the same ethnic, social, and religious stock. It was a ready-made congregation of kindling in need of a religious spark.

Yet Southern evangelists did not see the mass conversion of the army as an easy task. While it was true that the vast majority of the Confederate Army came from a nominal Protestant Christian background, or at least were familiar with the language and themes of the Bible, the typical Southern soldier at the beginning of the war could be stereotyped as a “backslider”. These were mostly young, single men, who averaged 18 years of age. Following the victory at Fort Sumter, a wave of patriotism, often eclipsed by a sense of adventure and a thirst for glory, swelled the ranks of volunteers. There were thousands of “90 day” men waiting for the chance to kill 20 Yankees quickly before the war was soon won. The harsh reality of life in the army soon set in. A soldier’s life was one of marching, drilling, and fatigue duty. Yeomen accustomed to a life of independence were quickly feeling the lash of the officer’s tongue and the sergeant’s whip, a punishment prior to the war that was known only for slaves. Furthermore, thousands of men were dying of disease and not combat. Life in camp was dull and depressing. Adventure was to be found, and it was

“Prior to the American Revolution, New England had been the ‘Bible Belt’ of America, while church attendance in the South was scant.”
found in cards, dice, whiskey, and women of ill repute. Southern military camps had a negative connotation, and yet no worse than any gathering of young single men today, whether at college, the army, or a work site.

There were further challenges to would-be Confederate evangelists. The Federal blockade of the Confederate coastline cut off the region from supplies, including Bibles, which like many other Southern goods had been imported from Europe prior to the war. The region’s lack of rail and road infrastructure also made delivery of religious materials problematic. Furthermore, while Southerners were almost exclusively of Protestant stock, there were still significant denominational differences and rivalries amongst Southern Christians. Southern evangelists also had the disadvantage of government indifference. While the Confederate government openly evoked God, it did little to aid His work amongst the army. Confederate chaplains were paid a pittance and a private’s rations, and did not have the official rank and status of their Union counterparts. If there was to be a great harvest of soldierly souls, whom would lead it—and how?

According to Confederate chaplain William W. Bennett, who was also a superintendent of a religious tract association, the proselytizing was organized by an ecumenical effort amongst denominations and religious publishers. Churches raised funds for ministers to aid the Confederate chaplainry, and also supplemented the meager income of the army preachers. Religious societies worked to distribute thousands of Psalm books and New Testaments, which could be cheaply printed in lieu of proper bibles and hymnals. Although the men in the Confederate army were not strangers to Christian doctrine, churches organized their efforts along the lines of foreign missionary work rather than peace time “tent meetings.”

The first fruits of revival came from the religious tract societies. The General Association of Baptist churches spent $24,000 to publish 40 tracts, 6,000 testimonials, and 14,000 camp hymns in 1861 alone. In 1862, the Methodist Episcopal Church circulated 800,000 pages of tracts. By 1865, the Evangelical Tract Society of Petersburg, Virginia, had printed over 50,000,000 pages from 100 different tracts. Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia had their own ecumenical tract societies which further printed thousands and thousands of testimonials. The Presbyterian Board of Publication even created a journal called the “Soldier’s Visitor,” which was especially adapted to the army. The Federal blockade had inadvertently aided the work of the Confederate missionaries as religious materials were often the only reading materials available to the soldiers in large quantities.

The first denomination to establish organized units of missionaries was the Baptist church. They began with 60 missionaries in 1861 and expanded throughout the war. In 1863 the Methodist Episcopal Church voted to establish a separate branch of its missionary society to the Confederate Army, and soon other denominations followed suit, making army missions more official. Missionary societies were used to working in hostile conditions, and in a primitive infrastructure with limited resources, and thus were well-equipped to handle the challenges of ministering in the Confederate service. The Protestant sects even worked closely together, Baptist ministers refrained from emphasizing immersion baptism, while Presbyterian evangelists deemphasized some of their own Calvinist beliefs. According to Rev. Bennett, the “aim of the laborers seemed to be to lead the soldiers to Christ, not to make them sectarians.” By 1863, the Christian associations were also working closely with the official army chaplains, pooling their resources and power. The Southern Evangelists seemed the most efficient and organized entity in the entire Confederacy.

The record of this “bottom-up” approach to evangelism which occurred by 1863 is a sharp contrast from the traditional “Lost Cause” view of the Confederate revival. In the decades following the war, a narrative emerged that the Confederate revival was led from the top down, as the men followed the examples

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The soldiers did indeed see religious revival as a “privilege.” It gave the men the opportunity to bond and relieved boredom and stress. Revivals contained Gospel stories adapted to the army, singing and playing musical instruments, and lively and intellectual sermons during an era when public oratory was a form of popular entertainment. Chaplains related how the soldiers waited patiently for services to begin and did not engage in “idle chatter” nor interrupt the sermons in any way. Perhaps these same men who had scoffed at church as a “woman’s place” found the camp revival a free expression of male bonding.

The revival of the Confederate Army took on a democratic air. Like the Southern slaves, yeoman soldiers took the same Gospel preached by the planter class and adapted it to their own needs and cultural attitudes. Several accounts by Confederate chaplains and civilian missionaries relate that the men in the ranks took to lay preaching. John William Jones related how he arrived to a Mississippi brigade in the rain to the sound of psalms and singing. The men of the brigade asked Jones for a sermon, and when the reverend protested due to the weather, reminded him: “We do all other military duty in any weather that comes, and we cannot see why we should allow the weather to interrupt our religious privileges.”

The most curious facet of the revivals of 1863 is that they did not carry over into civilian society. Indeed the same letters and newspapers that reported the religious fervor of the army condemned the vices of the civilian population. Confederate civilians were accused of price gouging, selfishness, and backsiding in their faith. Perhaps the civilians were acting in a “survival” mode, responding to food shortages, occupation, and the breakdown of society, by looking toward themselves. Ironically, it was the young, card-playing, whisky-drinking, “backsiding” soldiers who responded to the upheaval of the war by turning to God.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1863, newspapers, letters, and testimonials spread throughout the south about the effects of revival in the army. This revival was not contained to the Army in Virginia, but had also spread to the soldiers fighting in Tennessee and across the Mississippi River. Chaplains wrote in amazement about the lack of dice and card-playing in the camps, and how swearing, which had once been common, was seldom heard in the ranks. Report after report in the papers indicates that thousands of soldiers had committed to Christ by 1863, and their conversion was genuine.

The great harvest of 1863 came at a time of great trial for the Confederate soldier. The hope for quick victory, indeed victory of any sort, was dashed with the defeats of Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The Confederate soldiers dealt with the atrocities of a modern war fought with Napoleonic tactics. Friends and messmates were torn to bits right next to each other. Soldiers faced down cannon, rifled muskets, and bayonets across open field charges. Men could be killed by gunfire or by disease. In an era before “combat fatigue” and “post traumatic stress disorder,” 19th century men turned to the best coping mechanism at hand, their faith. The Confederate revivals would not only sustain thousands of men in the horrors of battle, but prepare those men for “God’s will,” to cope with the defeat and destruction of the South during the Civil War. For while the Civil War was a great harvest of death and destruction, it also brought a harvest of souls to the church. Many of the men who survived the war continued to lead churches and revivals themselves after the guns were finally silenced.

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Southern evangelicals that, beginning in the 1930s, left their towns and farms for the fresh optimism and opportunities of Southern California transformed a region, molding it into their own. Darren Dochuk’s account From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the rise of Evangelical Conservatism tells the story of the vast Depression era migration of those who not only sought better economic opportunity but showed up ready to win souls and influence the culture. In 1969, “At the moment Billy Graham appeared in Anaheim to lead his ten – day revival, more Southern-born residents, 2.5 million, lived in the Golden State than in any other single non-southern state,” says Dochuk.

At that revival, Graham spoke of the second coming of Christ. Graham, a lifelong Democrat, also offered another word about the growing leviathan of centralization and bureaucracy:

You see, we’ve built such a bureaucratic machine in this country and a monster, nobody can control it. It’s feeding upon itself and growing by leaps and bounds and it’s become like an octopus reaching into every home and life in America . . . It’s out of hand.

Southern evangelicals steeped in the New Deal ethic would ultimately abandon that form of progressivism for a newfound freedom. New Deal activism was increasingly viewed with suspicion as it embodied secular language and a secular practice. What’s more, Californians played an influential role in bringing the Southerners they left behind out of their New Deal leanings, and together they created a brand of conservatism characterized by an appealing, sunny optimism.

The evangelicalism of the Sun Belt would also mainstream the cultural and political sides of the movement and, as Dochuk tells it, “Southern evangelicalism could no longer be dismissed easily as a provincial religion for a parochial people.” Evangelical culture was now coast-to-coast and it drew freely from the deep well of Southern California’s vibrant economy, skilled entrepreneurs, and tech-savvy population.

This religious Sun-Belt coalition successfully shed some of the old obstacles from empowering a movement previously weighed down by racist or anti-Semitic tagalongs, not unlike what William F. Buckley would do with National Review.

Dochuk notes these transplants embraced a “mandate to make their religion count—to be champions of a cause, not the victims of circumstance.” To them, their faith stood in stark contrast to the progressive onslaught. Centralized power threatened private money for ministry and a freedom of worship. While government assistance was warranted in times of crisis, it was not a way of life, and a return to limited government was a primary worldview that was grounded in their faith and daily experience. The transplants of Southern California and the rising conservative influence would ultimately coalesce behind the 1980 election of their champion, Ronald Reagan.

Southern transplants provided a boom to faith-based charities. Now off the farm, neighborhoods provided church-goers opportunities to organize food pantries and anonymously stock the homes of people in need. As the author points out, “For the Shahan family, the intimacy of the country church often idealized by those from the South was a reality not enjoyed until after arriving in Southern California.”

With roots firmly tied to the American South, they built evangelical mission minded schools like Pepperdine University in Malibu. Pepperdine not only reflected the conservative theology of its supporters, but the economics department was rooted in free-market principles. “By imbuing young people with faith in the free market, a new South would emerge, primed for economic advancement and ready to lead the nation away from the precipice of collapse,” says Dochuk.

Churches also mirrored the conservative

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Theology of its members. The dominant denominations of the South popped up all over Southern California. Southerners flocked to colonize the culture of the Golden State and received a push back from liberal progressives such as big labor and mainline pulpits. For them, “Southern evangelicalism promised damnation for their region, not its salvation.”

While Dochuk spends plenty of time highlighting Reagan’s rise and his affinity for the evangelical Sun-Belt coalition, it is also described as the pinnacle moment of its force in American politics, at least for California. After Reagan, many of the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the original Westward migration began leaving California, many returning to their roots in the South, which now promises greater economic freedom and professional opportunities. Texas has benefited especially from a jobs boom, and in a clueless manner, a delegation of California lawmakers visited business-friendly Texas this year to study the reasons for its economic success.

Dochuk splendidly tells the story of the great Westward migration and the tale of a region that was not just caught up in an evangelical wave, but founded an empire of churches, colleges, and religious friendly businesses that was widely influential in changing evangelicalism and American politics. These transplanted Southerners brought a new vibrancy and entrepreneurial spirit to the region that helped to transform California into the eighth largest economy in the world. If their opponents believed the unleashing of Southern evangelicalism would cause “damnation for their region,” it will be interesting to see the reverse effect on a future Southern California that becomes more and more secularized and continues to impose regulations and shed jobs at an alarming rate.

These words from Ruth are perhaps among the most well-known passages in the Old Testament. The book of Ruth is a story about the redemption of God’s people. It wonderfully contrasts the wisdom and ways of God with the wisdom of man. The book of Ruth takes place at the same time as the book of Judges. In Judges, “everybody did what is right in their own eyes.” Ruth and the other central characters in that book do what is right in the eyes of God.

Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi, is in despair, broken-hearted, and she feels cursed. Her husband and sons have died. Presumably, as an older widow, she has no future. She decides to return to the Land of Judah to be among her people and persuades her daughters-in-laws that they must leave her or they too will be consigned to the same hopeless fate. They were Moabites and not Jews and faced better opportunity among their own people.

Ruth steps out in faith and defies human logic with her words to follow Naomi and God. Naomi decides to let her tag along because she realized there was no convincing Ruth despite her best efforts. As Naomi arrives back in Bethlehem, she continues her lament and demands to be called “Mara” or bitter. She is not even aware that she has returned with a blessing in Ruth.

A careful reading of the text of Chapter 1 shows a contrast in verse one and verse 22. A famine had enveloped the land but when Naomi and Ruth reached Bethlehem, it was the beginning of the harvest season. Bethlehem of course means “house of bread.” All the while through seemingly endless despair, God was working behind the scenes to bring the redemption of His people and all of humanity.

The beginning of Ruth starts out with seeming anguish and despair. It ends up as one of the greatest blessings in Scripture. Ruth’s marriage to Boaz sets up the genealogical line that will lead to the greatest redemption of all. The coming of Christ into the world. While things seemed hopeless and fruitless from a human standpoint, God was working behind the scenes to protect and redeem those who stay faithful to Him. Not only that, the Lord did it in a way that was more glorious and unimaginable than any human could comprehend.
There is a trend among evangelicals to engage in social reform without first developing a coherent social philosophy to guide the agenda. To bridge this gap, Acton Institute and Kuyper College are partnering together to translate Abraham Kuyper’s seminal three-volume work on common grace (De gemeene gratie). The below excerpt is from Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science & Art, the first published selection from the broader project forthcoming later this year from Christian’s Library Press.

Common grace, as Kuyper conceived it, was a theology of public responsibility and cultural engagement, rooted in Christians’ shared humanity with the rest of the world. Kuyper did not intend these volumes to be academic tomes. They were popular works—collections of newspaper editorials written over a six-year period—in which he equipped common people with the teaching they needed to effectively enter public life. Kuyper neither politicized the gospel to accommodate his agenda nor did he encourage his followers to develop a siege mentality in isolation from the rest of the world. As Kuyper writes in his introduction to the volumes, “If the believer’s God is at work in this world, then in this world the believer’s hand must take hold of the plow, and the name of the Lord must be glorified in that activity as well.”

This three-year project involves the complete translation of Abraham Kuyper’s three volumes, totaling over 1,700 pages. The first volume is scheduled to appear in fall 2012.

During his life, Kuyper labored tirelessly, publishing two newspapers, leading a reform movement out of the state church, founding the Free University of Amsterdam, and serving as Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Popular in our time for his devotional work, Kuyper’s Wisdom & Wonder displays his talents as a public theologian, focusing on his comprehensive and Reformed vision of science and art, still relevant for Christians today.

In this excerpt from his first chapter on art, Kuyper outlines a basic history of art in relation to religion, arguing that it properly stands in its own, independent sphere, founded upon God’s common grace that fills and preserves His creation. Kuyper contends that since the Reformation, art has been set free from being wholly subservient to the Church. Careful in affirming its ecclesiastical independence not to condemn art per se, however, Kuyper then describes the proper relationship, as he sees it, of the two spheres of art and religion. He writes, “The separation between church and art… does not at all bear the character of a complete separation between art and religion.”

Wisdom & Wonder will be available this coming November at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, and will appear with an introduction by Vincent E. Bacote, associate professor of theology at Wheaton College, and a foreword by Gabe Lyons and Jon Tyson. The following excerpt is presented here to offer readers a foretaste of the larger work.

For more information on the Common Grace Translation Project, including ways to order Wisdom & Wonder, visit http://www.acton.org/kuyper.

—Jordan J. Ballor & Stephen J. Grabill

As long as the religious idea draws its strength only from beholding nature, religion performed in the idolatrous temples bears a merely sensuous character and art dominates within the temple.

As soon as spiritual revelation returned in Israel, a spiritual sphere came to stand alongside the sphere of the sensuous, and both spheres found their interconnected expression in the rich symbolism of Zion’s temple. As the spiritual revelation reached its culmination in Christ, the symbolic was pushed back by the spiritual, and the apostolic epistles

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show us nothing less than a purely spiritual veneration among the apostolic churches. As soon, however, as the church expanded among the nations, who were already by nature dependent on the sensuous, lush symbolism crept back into the church. During the iconoclastic controversy, the spiritual reaction appeared powerless to cast off the yoke, so that worship continued to display a highly symbolic character for many centuries.

This touched the nations of northern Europe. However, after the Reformation a new spiritual reaction arose that this time triumphed, introducing in northern Europe a kind of worship that sought its power only in the spiritual beauty of the soul. Once it had achieved this position, spiritual veneration was increasingly able to survive, leading with observable progress increasingly to despising all outward display and to establishing worship in spirit and in truth to be the core of worship.

This process leads to the question: Does this course of events warrant the conclusion that therefore art is condemned, and art is to be considered by spiritually oriented Christians as an evil to be opposed? That question can be answered only in the affirmative if one views art merely as a parasite that can grow only by being attached to the stem of ecclesiastical life. Burdening the sacred with what drives the spiritual into the background, all for the sake of the growth of art, is the honorable reputation of religion, in which case we must declare without hesitation that it would be better for all art to disappear than that the spiritual character of our Christian religion would be injured. A people can live and grow without art, if necessary, but not without religion.

But is that the proper question? Or should we not rather acknowledge that in its initial appearance, art was powerless in learning to walk, had it not been held by the reins of the priest? Should we not acknowledge that once it had achieved further development, art could appeal in every possible way to an independent, free, and autonomous existence?

To see this clearly, we obviously need to investigate the essence of art more deeply, something we can undertake only in a subsequent section. But at this point, we can already observe that so much of art, with its diversity, could emerge at first like an ivy vine curling around the sacred, and only in a later stage of development grow into an entirely independent plant.

In this connection, we recall education with all its branches, an enterprise that initially among both pagans and Christians leaned upon and was supported by the sacred and the holy, but thereafter came to stand on its own legs, and only in that independent position developed its proper essence. Only because art was itself religion, and thus constituted an integral element of religion, could its right of independence be contested. By contrast, everyone knows how rarely one finds pious and zealous confessors of the Lord’s name in the art world, and conversely, how in broad circles of the artist’s life, even the moral ordinances are treated lightly. From this we can already surmise how by nature the artistic genius and the spirit of divine adoption are scarcely twin sisters.

So the outcome has shown how, after receiving their divorce papers from the ecclesiastical domain at the time of the Reformation, the arts hardly disappeared from view. Far rather was it the case that art everywhere ensured that henceforth it could lead an independent existence. The outcome has shown the wonderful ways that art has succeeded in this endeavor.

It cannot be entirely denied that this has led in part to making art a worldly pursuit, indeed, to secularizing art, to say nothing of misusing art to satisfy sinful desires. We will return to this as well.

But let it be said that in no case can this abuse of freedom be advanced as proof that art has no right to its independent existence. In our human life, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that eventually does not misuse for sinful purposes the freedom it acquires. Observe how, time and again, freedom of conscience is abused for blasphemy, or, if you will, how the sovereignty that God grants to a prince or a ruler is abused for oppressing, tyrannizing, and weakening a people. By itself, it is completely true that after its liberation, art became
Why does the Acton Institute publish the Journal of Markets & Morality?

The Acton Institute has long recognized the critical importance that first-rate scholarship plays in the development of “a free and virtuous society.” The *Journal of Markets & Morality* is a peer-reviewed academic journal. The journal is the flagship publication with which the institute shapes the larger academic and intellectual conversation about the free economy.

The journal is truly interdisciplinary in an era where it can be very difficult to cover academic subjects from a variety of perspectives, and even more difficult to find those that actually are able to execute that intention effectively. So, the *Journal* engages economic, political, historical, theological, and philosophical topics from scholars working out of their own disciplines. But it is not enough to leave these issues isolated from the critical perspectives of other methodologies and disciplines. While there is a distinct editorial vision and mission, the journal’s editors are also uncompromisingly committed to scholarship at the highest levels. This commitment means that the journal does not simply publish articles that adhere to a particular ideological perspective, but rather encourages critical voices from a variety of economic, political, and theological perspectives.

One piece of evidence of the success in realizing this ambitious vision is the fact that the *Journal* is indexed in the leading databases of theology (ATLA Religion) and economics (EconLit). Another distinction of the *Journal* is the extent to which it has brought some significant primary sources from the past back into circulation. The process of finding appropriate works, getting them translated, edited, and introduced is one of the most challenging and demanding aspects of publishing the journal. But this work also represents one of the journal’s lasting scholarly legacies. The journal is sometimes the first place that someone could read many significant (but often overlooked) figures in English, and therefore, with works from figures like Althusius, Cajetan, Lessius, Mariana, Musculus, and Zanchi, represents the cutting-edge of historical scholarship.

By helping to inform and shape the scholarly conversation about economics and its relationship with history and theology, the *Journal of Markets & Morality* is a critical component of Acton’s mission to promote a society characterized by both freedom and virtue.

Kris Alan Mauren
Executive Director
And self-definition also promotes the idea of self-sufficiency, does it not?

Yes, it’s a delusion of self-sufficiency and a delusion of complete autonomy. And none of us is autonomous, ultimately. We don’t come into being simply by ourselves, nor can we live simply by ourselves. Which opens the way to sin and depersonalization. That’s what sin does to us. It’s what these addictive behaviors do, because they isolate us.

It seems as though, as our culture becomes more affluent and the material temptations expand, we can easily be drawn into that trap of self-sufficiency if we’re not careful.

It ceases to become a matter of pursuing what we need. It’s simply a matter of pursuing what we want. In other words, fulfilling our desires and lusts rather than our needs.

You referred to Father Alexander Schmemann’s famous definition of secularism as the negation of worship, as the negation of man as a worshipping being. Could you tell us how Schmemann’s insights will help us navigate the high secular world we live in now?

Well, the way I explain what Father Schmemann taught about secularism is compartmentalization. And by that I mean the compartmentalization of our lives and to a great degree, it’s about the compartmentalization of God into a little box where we can access Him when we care to, but really most of the time we ignore him. We’re trying to put God into a place where we can control Him. What that does is fundamentally distort the intuitive reality, or the intuitive awareness of God, Who is present at all times and everywhere. This is how we understood Him in our original state, the state in which we were created to be and from which we fell. This secularization is basically rooted in a kind of dualism of excluding or separating God from His creation, the material world. And it’s precisely in the reality of God’s presence in every aspect of the material world and that intuitive awareness of Him shining forth in and through the creation that’s the real core of the whole sacramental vision of reality.

How would that sacramental worldview help us become better Christian stewards?

When we see things in God and radiant with His presence, we’re not likely to abuse them. So if we can have that perception, if we can attain that degree of spiritual vision, everything has its place in the creation and our stewardship of that becomes our fundamental duty. Not that we leave things of the creation untouched, but rather that we truly value them.

You see that in highly materialistic cultures, Soviet Russia comes to mind, where the physical environment was horribly degraded and even people were viewed more or less as purely material objects to be controlled and manipulated.

It’s no different in our culture when we become purely utilitarian. When people look at the environment and think, How can I extract the greatest profit? And then walk away from the mess.

What’s the important work of the churches with the respect to the advance of secularism? What is the witness that our bishops and our clergy and laity should offer?

I think the most important thing is that the members of our churches live integrated, spiritually informed lives. That’s first and foremost. That’s the greatest way of battling against this culture. We can’t create a cultural movement that’s based on a worldview that comes out of a spiritual vision if people don’t share that vision. For those who do share that vision, then it becomes simply a matter of teaching how to live out that life. We have
to show how the spiritual is integrated into all of life and how God, on a personal level, and religion on another level, are not simply relegated to just a certain box or a certain category. Faith cannot be dismissed as a compartmentalized influence on either our lives or on society.

In your talk, you also touched on the rise of Christianophobia, which describes the process of pushing the faith witness out of the public square. This has been going on for some time. It seems though that even some Christians have absorbed this view, preferring to keep faith a private matter. What do you make of this?

That’s precisely compartmentalization. And it’s the compartmentalization of the Church and its witness into simply one more interest group, another lobbying entity, with all views of equal weight and simply a matter of opinion. Now obviously I’m not arguing for some kind of unified church-state with a single official view. That can also take you to a very secularized place, as a matter of fact. But people of faith are informed by not simply doctrines and dogmas, but by that living consciousness that God is and that our lives are dependent on Him. And that changes one’s entire worldview and stands in sharp contrast to the views of those who believe there is no God or He is not present and our lives are not dependent on Him. That’s the fundamental difference. And so while an authentic faith witness is not going to come out in any kind of great official pronouncements from some kind of central authority, we can work toward a common vision that is arrived at by people of a common mind.

You’re talking about an ethic, a culture that you live it out. It’s not just talking about these things, but it’s embodied and experienced in relationship to Christ.

And I would also say more broadly that I’m talking about people of faith, who are also Jews and who are Muslims. Not just Christians. They have a witness to share, too, and in our society I think we can mix common cause with them in many areas. Because it’s a matter of a living perception of God. Now, we can disagree about some of the specifics. For Christians, our perception of God is always in terms of Jesus Christ. For a Jew or a Muslim, their perception of God is not through Christ. Yet, they still have a very powerful perception of God. With Christians, they would share a belief that God informs all of their moral and ethical decisions.

Towards the end of your Acton University talk you said that, despite all the grave and deep problems in the culture, it can be fixed. What gives you that hope?

Because there are people who believe and people who love. And it’s precisely that reality that’s going to keep, I think, the culture from going over the precipice. It’s always been the case that there’s been a kind of a remnant of the faithful. Is it not that remnant that remains the foundation stone of the culture? We have that when cultures go awry, so that no matter what happens politically or economically, there remains the core of a community that’s intact and living according to the Gospel. That can be our lifeline.

At Acton University, you talked about wealth and made the statement that wealth in itself is not evil or wicked or bad, and that this is something that a lot of Christians struggle with. How would you guide a Christian that comes to you and says, You know, I’ve had some material success. Yes, I give to the Church and everything, but I see so many without the things I’ve achieved or have in a material way. How am I to make sense of what I have, if I have more than my brother?

The first and foremost thing about wealth is that you have to give thanks to God for it. But you also need to know something about stewardship, that everything comes from God and it can disappear just as quickly, sometimes much more quickly, as the length of time it took to earn the wealth. And so you have to give thanks to God. And stewardship requires that you take very seriously the question of how wealth can best be used for the betterment of the greater community and for the betterment of society. You know, we’re all called to give to the poor. But as they say, it may be better to teach a man to fish than simply to give him a fish. A proper understanding of stewardship might lead us to teach a person how to do a job rather than simply give him a handout.

That would be consistent with an authentic monastic understanding of work, would it not?

Yes because you learn that work, no matter what it is, is good. Work is holy and if it’s taken on for unselfish motives rather than just self enrichment, it can be something that God will bless and that it can become a part of our spiritual life. How we do our work is part of an integrated spiritual life.
Oliver Ellsworth [1745 – 1807]

Liberty is a word which, according as it is used, comprehends the most good and the most evil of any in the world.

Oliver Ellsworth played an instrumental role in the shaping of the early Republic. Not only did he ratify the constitution but he also served as Chief Justice of the United States from 1796 to 1800. Ellsworth, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Connecticut, is credited with dropping the term “national” for the arm of the central government and replacing it with “federal.”

At the convention, Ellsworth played a major role in passing the Great Compromise, which allowed U.S. Senators to be elected by state legislatures. In 1913, the Constitution was amended, allowing for direct election by the people.

He was a supporter of a system of government that maintained the principle of local rule and understood central government as the body that would strengthen the rights of property and the harmony of the republic. So firm was his commitment to local control that he returned to the service of state and local government after his federal service.

Ellsworth was born in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1745. He attended Yale and transferred to Princeton, where after studying theology for a time in preparation for the ministry, turned in the direction of law and was admitted to the bar in 1771. Ellsworth also farmed to supplement his law income, which was modest early in his career.

He was a supporter of the American Revolution, actively serving in the Connecticut government and in 1777 he was appointed to represent Connecticut in the Continental Con-

gress. He oversaw important war committees and fervently worked to cobble together support for General George Washington during a time that many described as “the darkest hour of the revolution.” In a tribute to Ellsworth delivered to the 1902 graduating law class at Harvard, Henry Cabot Lodge declared, “It was hard and thankless work not shining brilliantly before the eyes of men, but all the more to be honored because done in obscurity, in the midst of distrust and contempt, and without hope of either present applause or of future reward.”

Michael Toth, author of Founding Federalist: The Life of Oliver Ellsworth said of the New Englander,

For the entirety of his life, Ellsworth was a regular churchgoer who prayed daily and invoked his faith with his children. ‘This life is but an embryo of our existence,’ he wrote his daughter Abigail in December 1791, ‘and derives its consequences only from its connection with future scenes.’

He believed strongly that religious moral formation and character was instrumental to the health of a nation. After the death of his young son Oliver Jr., Ellsworth penned a beautiful letter to his wife saying, “This world has now fewer charms in my eyes than it once did & I have no doubt but you can say the same. Happy for us, if it keeps a better world more constantly in view, and is a means of bringing us to those joys and rest into which I fully believe our dear departed little son is already entered.”

Ellsworth was instrumental in helping to shape an America with an independent judiciary and a system of federalism. John Adams later called Ellsworth “the firmest pillar” of the federal government during its earliest years. If Ellsworth is largely forgotten today, he should be remembered again as somebody who returned to serve locally, though he once was called to the highest level of government.
It is telling that the Washington Post report on the religious Left’s Circle of Protection campaign for big government describes the effort as one that would “send chills through any politician who looks to churches and religious groups as a source of large voting blocs,” because, in fact, this is not an honest faith-inspired campaign to protect the “least of these” from Draconian government cuts, as claimed. It is a hyper-political movement that offers up the moral authority of churches and aid organizations to advance the ends of the Obama administration and its allies in Congress.

The Circle of Protection, led by Jim Wallis and his George Soros-funded Sojourners group, is advancing a false narrative based on vague threats to the “most vulnerable” if we finally take the first tentative steps to fix our grave budget and debt problems. For example, Wallis frequently cites cuts to federal food programs as portending dire consequences to “hungry and poor people.”

Which programs? He must have missed the General Accountability Office study on government waste released this spring, which looked at, among others, 18 federal food programs. These programs accounted for $62.5 billion in spending in 2008 for food and nutrition assistance. But only seven of the programs have actually been evaluated for effectiveness. Apparently it is enough to simply launch a government program, and the bureaucracy to sustain it, to get the Circle of Protection activists to sanctify it without end. Never mind that it might not be a good use of taxpayer dollars.

It is also telling that the group’s advertised “Evangelical, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, African-American, and Latino Christian leaders” who are so concerned about the poor and vulnerable in the current budget negotiations have so little to say about private charity, which approached $300 billion last year. To listen to them talk, it is as if a prudent interest in reining in deficits and limiting government waste, fraud, and bloat would leave America’s poor on the brink of starvation. It is as if bureaucratic solutions, despite the overwhelming evidence of the welfare state’s pernicious effects on the family, are the only ones available to faith communities. This is even stranger for a group of people who are called to “love the neighbor” first and last with a personal commitment.

Although the Circle of Protection has been endorsed by a few Catholic bishops, the predictably left-leaning social justice groups, and Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Church in America has long moved beyond the heady (and increasingly-distant) days of the 1980s when knee-jerk opposition to any reduction in government spending was the norm. That still holds, even if some of the staff and a few of the bishops at the Bishops’ Conference still imbibe such nostalgia.

The actions of Wallis and the co-signers of the Circle of Protection are only understandable in light of political, not primarily religious, aims. Wallis, after all, has been serving as self-appointed chaplain to the Democratic National Committee and recently met with administration officials to help them craft faith-friendly talking points for the 2012 election. And when Wallis emerged from that White House meeting, he crowed that “almost every pulpit in America is linked to the Circle of Protection … so it would be a powerful thing if our pulpits could be linked to the bully pulpit here.”

Think about that for a moment. Imagine if a pastor had emerged from a meeting with President George W. Bush and made the same statement. I can just imagine the howls of “Theocracy!” and “Christian dominionism!” that would echo from the mobs of Birkenstock-shod, tie-dyed, and graying church activists who would immediately assemble at the White House fence to protest such a blurring of Church and State.

But in the moral calculus of Jim Wallis and his Circle of Protection supporters, there’s no problem with prostrating yourself, your Church, and your aid organization before Caesar. As long as he’s on your side of the partisan divide.

This article first appeared at National Review Online.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) is a significant figure in the history of the Netherlands and modern Protestant theology. A prolific intellectual, he founded a political party and a university, and served as the prime minister of Holland (1901–1905). His enduring passion was to develop a theology for the general public and was seen in his extensive elaboration of the doctrine of common grace.

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