

# Religion & Liberty

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ACTON INSTITUTE'S INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RELIGION,  
ECONOMICS AND CULTURE



Data Privacy

## Social media censorship: Regulation or innovation?

The age of  
'censureship'

Lower taxes,  
higher giving

Socialists to  
confiscate  
church property

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Rev. Ben Johnson EXECUTIVE EDITOR

"Almighty God hath created the mind free," wrote Thomas Jefferson. Others believe that leaves too much to chance. The desire to shape news coverage, and the proper response, frames this issue.

When "the owners of these platforms suppress or delete content they deem objectionable," writes Acton Institute co-founder Rev. Robert Sirico, this should not properly be called censorship but "censureship." This insight should guide all discussions on this topic.

Ed Morrow notes how search engines disadvantage right-of-center news and websites – and the laws that would rectify or formalize this behavior.

Anne Rathbone Bradley reminds us that the same decentralized information flow that establishes prices is at work in the spontaneous fact-checking of news on social media. Regulating either can grievously distort reality. The solution to the dehumanizing tendency of social media, writes Bradley J. Birzer of Hillsdale College, is the humanizing presence of true community.

*First Things* editor Rusty Reno engaged in two debates with Rev. Sirico over the Christian approach to state regulation. Reno expounds on his views in his latest book, *Return of the Strong Gods*, which is reviewed in this issue by Kai Weiss of the Austrian Economics Center in Vienna.

Education forms the *leitmotif* of this issue, as a U.S. Supreme Court case concerning school choice could overturn the Blaine amendment in 37 state constitutions. While entanglement of federal funds with private – especially religious – schools presents cause for alarm, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* involves private funding streams dammed by the state. Similarly, Jovan Tripkovic – another first-time author – describes a new law in Montenegro that could allow the government to seize the property of the nation's most historical and popular church; it also effectively forbids parents from giving their young children a parochial education.

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Cover Photo: Mark Zuckerberg in 2018. (Photo credit: Anthony Quintano, CC BY 2.0)

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## Prosperity and the ‘Four Horsemen of the Optimist’

Patrick Oettig

ACTON INSTITUTE

Currently, less than 10 percent of the global population lives in extreme poverty. Yet a study from the Barna Group recently found that 67 percent of Americans believe the global poverty rate is increasing. The good news is broader and more expansive than poverty measures. Globally, people are living longer, eating more calories, drinking cleaner water, becoming more educated, experiencing less violence, and suffering lower maternal death rates during childbirth.

In his latest book, *More From Less*, Andrew McAfee attributes this unprecedented global progress to the “Four Horsemen of the Optimist”: technological progress, capitalism, responsive governments, and political awareness. These advances have come at the same time that we are experiencing what McAfee calls “dematerialization.” Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, exponential economic growth has meant that we were increasingly hard on our planet – using more energy, more raw materials, and creating more pollution. But in the past 50 years, this has changed dramatically.

One small but significant example is the weight reduction of aluminum cans in packaging. By employing innovative technology in a competitive environment, over six decades U.S. manufacturers have reduced the average weight of an aluminum can from 85 grams to just 12.75 grams. “If all beverage cans weighed what they did in 1980, they would have required an extra 580,000 tons of aluminum,” McAfee writes.

This decoupling of economic growth from natural resources has come largely from the advance of technology and capitalism. Technological progress provides us with innovation, while capitalism supplies us with the incentives to innovate in the first place. Businesses, pursuing greater profits by reducing input costs, find ways to produce more and better goods for consumption with fewer raw materials.

If we truly want to help the world’s poor and at the same time create a cleaner environment for ourselves and our children, we will need to harness the power of technology, greater access to global free markets, and governments that maintain sound institutions of justice.

## Big government and corruption correlate: Study

Joshua Gregor

ACTON INSTITUTE

Alejandro Chafuen, Acton’s Managing Director, International, writes in *Forbes* about the relationship between economic freedom and corruption. Transparency International released its 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index in January, and Chafuen correlates these results with countries’ rankings in the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom.

As a general rule, greater economic freedom and lower corruption seem to go hand in hand. He wrote:

Although I was born and raised in a country where corruption, especially petty corruption, had become part of many aspects of life, I only began studying the issue more thoroughly when corruption measurements were published. The first of these was that of Transparency International, which released the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 1995. The annual index continues to be expanded and improved. It covers 180 countries and territories around the world. ... In 1997, Eugenio Guzmán, then a recent graduate of the London School of Economics and today the dean of the school of government at the Universidad del Desarrollo in Chile, and I conducted the first study correlating economic freedom with corruption data from Transparency International.

The study, which shows that there is a strong and significant correlation between higher economic-freedom scores and lower corruption scores, was preceded by an analysis of the theories and studies of corruption which had been conducted until then. Since that first effort in 1997, I have conducted studies and correlated the data on a regular basis, and the basic conclusion and insights remain the same: Economic freedom is a major deterrent to corruption.

The 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index and the 2019 Heritage Index of Economic Freedom are no exception. As the chart shows, more economically free countries are also less corrupt. The opposite also holds: countries with the most corrupt leaders and institutions show dismal scores in respect for economic freedom.

For further reading take a look at *A Theory of Corruption*, coauthored by Acton Research Director Dr. Samuel Gregg and Osvaldo Schenone.

## Acton Institute ranks among world’s best in think tank report

Rev. Ben Johnson

ACTON INSTITUTE

A report on the global impact of think tanks has ranked the Acton Institute among the world’s most influential thought leaders. The University of Pennsylvania released its “2019 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” on January 31. This year, the annual report – which was “designed to identify and recognize centers of excellence in all the major areas of public policy research” – opened the ratings to all 8,248 think tanks in its database.

The report has recognized the Acton Institute since 2010, and, once again, Acton ranked well in the categories with which it has become most closely identified.

In “Top Social Policy Think Tanks,” the category Acton values most dearly, the report rated the Acton Institute in the top 20 worldwide. This year, the Acton Institute moved up one spot to number 12 – behind the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, but ahead of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI, 14) and the UK-based Civitas (31).

The report ranked the Acton Institute number nine in the world for “Best Advocacy Campaign.” Acton finished in the top 25 globally for “Best Think Tank Conference,” ahead of the Council on Foreign Relations. Despite competition from think tanks with much greater size and funding, the Acton Institute rated in the top third (31) of the “Top U.S. Think Tanks” in 2019 – behind the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER, 25) but ahead of the Pew Research Center (32) and the Economic Policy Institute (35).

The United States has more think tanks than any other single country, with 1,871. India is a distant second, with 509.

Top free-market think tanks outside the United States included the Fraser Institute (Canada, 18), Transparency International (Germany, 20), the Adam Smith Institute (UK, 58), and the F.A. Hayek Foundation (Slovakia, 128).

The report reflects the Acton Institute’s growing recognition as the world’s premier think tank addressing the relationship between markets and ethics, especially within an ecumenical religious context. Your kind donation helps us expand our impact.



ESSAY

## ***Espinoza v. Montana* can reverse 150 years of anti-Catholic prejudice**

Rev. Ben Johnson

Cultural critics, in politics and academia, insist that the United States must atone for its shameful history of discrimination against minorities. Thankfully, the Supreme Court's *Espinoza* case gives justices the opportunity to do just that: to strike down antiquated, counterproductive, and discriminatory laws disfavoring religious schools and paving the way for greater school choice.

Perhaps the only prejudice in U.S. history not highlighted by the “woke” is America’s pervasive anti-Catholicism. John Winthrop wrote in 1631 that the first reason the Pilgrims wished to establish

the Massachusetts Bay Colony was “to raise a bulwark against the kingdom of Anti-Christ which the Jesuits labour to rear up in those parts.” Anti-Catholic bigots worried aloud that Catholicism was incompatible with the American experiment (a position they strangely share with today’s Catholic Integralists). As a result, North Carolina did not allow Roman Catholics to hold public office until 1835.

The same year, abolitionist Lyman Beecher encapsulated this view when he wrote that Catholicism is a “despotic religion” that “never prospered but in alliance with despotic governments ... and at this moment is the main stay of the battle against republican institutions.” (Emphasis in original.) The hub of the purported conspiracy, he wrote, lay in Catholic parochial schools. “Catholic powers are determined to take advantage” of American children “by thrusting in professional instructors and underbidding us in the cheapness of education – calculating that for a morsel of meat we shall sell our birth-right,” he wrote.

His views took pictorial form when cartoonist Thomas Nast produced the most virulently anti-Catholic cartoon in American history for *Harper’s Weekly* on September 30, 1871. Nast depicted Catholic bishops as alligators, rising from “The American River Ganges” to devour innocent American children, as the “U.S. Public School” stood as the ramparts against the Vatican’s onslaught. The magazine reprinted the cartoon, by popular demand, in May 1875.

The high-water mark of bigotry against Catholic schools came that winter with the Blaine amendment, introduced by James G. Blaine, the onetime Speaker of the House, President James Garfield’s secretary of state, and failed 1884 Republican presidential candidate. Blaine tried to amend the U.S. Constitution so that “no money raised by taxation in any State, for the support of public schools, or derived from any public fund therefor, nor any public lands devoted thereto, shall ever be under the control of any religious sect.” Blaine fell four votes shy of Senate ratification, but 37 states added similar amendments to their state constitutions.

The amendment targeted the burgeoning number of Roman Catholic schools, as U.S. public schools already taught Protestant Bible lessons, prayers, and hymns. But soon, government-sponsored discrimination would boomerang. The Supreme Court struck down state-led prayer in public schools (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962), state-led Bible reading (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963), direct state funding of religious schools (*Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 1971), posting the Ten Commandments in public schools (*Stone v. Graham*, 1980) and state-sponsored prayer at public school graduations (*Lee v. Weisman*, 1992). The public schools – established to teach “religion, morality, and knowledge” – had become the freeway to the Secular City. And the Blaine amendment in 37 states now denied Protestant schools state funding. This should serve as a lesson for those of

Photo: Kendra Espinoza, with daughters Sarah and Naomi. (Photo credit: Institute for Justice, CC BY 4.0.)

any faith who embrace “The Caesar Strategy” of using the power of the state for their own religious ends; the power they establish will be used against them once the state is controlled by their opponents.

However, “[s]tudents and teachers do not ‘shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate,’” as the Trump administration recently noted in a federal guidance to school districts. This comes against the backdrop of the U.S. Supreme Court, which heard oral arguments in January in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*, which could strike down all 37 Blaine amendments.

In 2015, the Montana legislature gave a dollar-for-dollar tax deduction of up to \$150 to anyone who donated to a private, non-profit scholarship fund for needy schoolchildren. The independently administered scholarship let parents send their children to any private school, religious or secular. But state officials told Kendra Espinoza not to apply, because she sends her two children to a Christian school in Kalispell.

With the help of the Institute for Justice, she and two other parents sued, arguing the state infringed their religious rights under the First Amendment. In December 2018, the Montana Supreme Court ruled that, through the program, state revenues “indirectly pay tuition at private, religiously-affiliated schools.” To assure no such entanglement of funds, justices struck down the entire program.

There is reason to believe the Supreme Court will overturn their ruling, and more reason people of faith should hope it does. One of these is plain logic: A tax deduction is not a subsidy. By offering a tax deduction, the state does not give anything to the school or the taxpayer; it merely refrains from taking some portion of the taxpayer’s earnings. The IRS allows tax deductions for charitable gifts, the largest share of which go to religious institutions. This does not constitute government “funding,” unless you believe all citizens’ money properly belongs to the government.

Supreme Court precedent is on Espinoza’s side. In the 1983 *Mueller v. Allen* ruling, justices upheld a state tax deduction for the cost of tuition, books, and transportation to any school, public or private. The write-off constitutes an “attenuated financial benefit, ultimately controlled by the private choices of individual parents, that eventually flows to parochial schools from the neutrally available tax benefit.”

Indeed, in 1947, justices ruled that the state could directly reimburse parents for the cost of transporting students to parochial schools (*Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*). And in 2002, the Supreme Court upheld Cleveland’s school choice program in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, even though 96 percent of students chose religious schools. Justices found the city “provides assistance directly to a broad class of citizens who, in turn, direct government aid to religious schools wholly as a result of their own genuine and independent private choice.”

The danger is that government funding will bring government regulation, such as insisting on a curriculum that violates the religion of the recipients. A tax deduction solves this problem, while respecting parental rights.

The rights of parents to educate their children in their faith should be primary to all people of faith. “The prime truth in the whole schools issue,” Abraham Kuyper wrote, is that parents are the only people “called by nature ... to determine the choice of school” for their children. “Parental rights must be seen as a sovereign right in this sense, that it is not delegated by any other authority, that it is inherent in fatherhood and motherhood, and that it is given directly from God to the father and mother.”

Similarly, the Roman Catholic faith defines parental rights as primary and pre-political. “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children,” according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Curiously, those who decry paternalism when the government bans people from using food stamps for junk food have nothing to say about the state constricting the authority of parents to educate their own children. Often, they demand it.

Those who believe education provides the key to lift bright young students out of poverty should champion children’s access to the best quality education, public or private. And those concerned with making reparations for America’s “tragic history” should support overturning these relics of anti-Catholic discrimination.

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**May 14**  
**From Logos to Enlightenment...  
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**Samuel Gregg, D.Phil. (Oxon.)**  
Director of Research,  
Acton Institute

AUG

**August 20**  
**Janus v. AFSCME:  
A Conversation  
with Mark Janus**



**Mark Janus**  
Senior Fellow,  
Liberty Justice Center

SEP

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**Intersectionality  
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ESSAY

# Socialists to confiscate church property in Montenegro

Jovan Tripkovic

Events in Montenegro underscore how property rights, parental rights, and religious liberty go together. That nation's socialist leadership passed a law allowing the government to seize religious property, declare a monopoly over the

education of the youngest children, and limit parents' ability to raise their children in their faith.

On December 27, 2019, despite popular opposition, the Parliament of Montenegro passed the law on "freedom of religion or beliefs and legal status of religious communities." Before the members of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists and their coalition partners voted on the law, 18 Members of Parliament – who belong to the opposition Democratic Front – were arrested. The law passed in the dead of night and without a proper dialogue with the largest and oldest church in the country, the Serbian Orthodox Church, nor with other religious communities. Furthermore, it passed without popular support. This law and the process by which it was adopted speaks volumes about the government of Montenegro and about socialism's disregard for religious and parental rights.

Since 1991, Montenegro has been ruled by Milo Đukanović, the president of the Democratic Party of Socialists. Previously, Đukanović served four terms as prime

minister. President Đukanović is a former Communist, and his political party is the direct legal and ideological successor of the League of Communists of Montenegro. It could be said that Đukanović is the only Communist head of state who survived the fall of the Berlin Wall.

During this time, Đukanović has been accused of autocratic rule, corruption, censorship, discrimination against the Serbian national community, illicit trafficking of tobacco, and war crimes during the siege of Dubrovnik. Thanks to diplomatic immunity and the constant support of the West, which considers him as a loyal ally in the region, Đukanović has not faced legal repercussions.

In 2000, the Democratic Party of Socialists began agitating for the independence of Montenegro from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a campaign led by Đukanović. Montenegro won independence in a 2006 referendum to separate from Serbia, its key historical ally. For almost 14 years, President Đukanović and his political party have been working on

Photo: Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in Korotor, Montenegro. (Photo credit: Adam Jones, Ph.D. CC BY-SA 3.0.)

nation-building. A crucial aspect of that process is the creation of a new national church.

In June 2019, at the convention of the Democratic Party of Socialists, President Đukanović repeated his call for the creation of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. During his speech, he emphasized the importance of this church in strengthening the Montenegrin national identity. Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, said that “this would be the first time in history that a declared atheist is creating a church.”

Yet Đukanović sees the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro as the biggest obstacle to creating his own national church. So, for years, Đukanović has been accusing the Serbian Church of undermining the sovereignty of Montenegro.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has been an integral part of Montenegro – under different names, due to complex historical circumstances – since the thirteenth century. Since 1920, the Serbian Orthodox Church has been present in its current administrative capacity: a metropolitan who oversees three dioceses. The jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church over the territory of Montenegro is recognized by all canonical Orthodox churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Contrary to the long tradition and history of the Serbian Church, a non-canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church was founded in 1993 and officially registered as a religious community in January 2000. The new church was founded in the town of Cetinje, the historical capital of Montenegro. Since 1997, Mihailo (born Miraš) Dedeić has been the leader of the non-canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church. As a priest, Dedeić was excommunicated by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I. The church he leads is not recognized by any canonical Orthodox body. Additionally, it is well known that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church has a very small membership. It is worth mentioning that in June 2018, the Montenegrin Orthodox Church went through a split, so currently the country has two non-canonical, unrecognized religious communities with the same name.

Since the Montenegrin Orthodox Church lacks a living tradition, historical connection with the people, significant church buildings, and a large number of

adherents, the government of Montenegro decided to assist it in acquiring some of these things. The Democratic Party of Socialists proposed and adopted a law that would weaken the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Article 62 of the law could transfer its property to the newly minted church. Specifically, the law states that religious buildings or lands used by any religious community in Montenegro – which were built by the state or financed by public revenues; or based on the joint investment of the citizens; or were owned by the state before December 1, 1918, without the proper evidence of ownership – shall constitute state property as the cultural heritage of Montenegro.

Put simply, if a religious community cannot provide evidence of private ownership, the government of Montenegro has the right to assert state ownership over the property, confiscate it, and redistribute the property to the state-supported Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

This article opens the door for massive corruption and backroom deals. The state also covets land owned by the Serbian Orthodox Church for the development of the hospitality industry. It seems fitting that the government of Montenegro is trying to confiscate church property, considering that the regime has not yet returned church property the Communist regime nationalized in the 1940s.

Besides confiscation of ecclesiastical property, the new law establishes an extremely complicated and lengthy registration process for religious communities. The seat of the religious community registered in the territory of Montenegro must be resident in Montenegro. This would have a major impact on the Serbian Orthodox Church, which will have to obtain special status in Montenegro to continue its activities.

Last but not least, state authorities shall decide the proper name of a religious community. Politicians justified this under the guise of preventing confusion between churches. However, this provision could potentially strip the Serbian Orthodox Church of its name and transfer it to the leadership of the non-canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

In addition to property rights and the registration process, the Democratic Party of Socialists, as the true successor of the Communist Party, decided in the new law to constrict religious education. Article 54

of the law prohibits religious communities from forming primary schools, creating an artificial state monopoly over the education of the youngest children. Articles 51 and 52 clearly limit parental rights to educate their children about their own religion. According to these two articles, parents do not have the right to teach their children over the age of 11 about religion without the children’s consent. Violators may be fined €2,000 (\$2,200 U.S.). So, the socialist government wants to usurp parental rights over religious education until the children are 11, then transfer those rights directly to the children.

Along with opposition politicians, members of the Parliament, and citizens of Montenegro, the new law on “freedom of religion” has been criticized by all major Christian leaders, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Pope Francis, Russian Patriarch Kirill, and the Metropolitan of All America and Canada Tikhon of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), among others. Patriarch Bartholomew I wrote a letter in which he explicitly said that the Ecumenical Patriarch recognizes the canonical jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church over Montenegro. In a subsequent interview, he said that he would never recognize the Montenegrin Orthodox Church as canonical.

Since the Parliament of Montenegro adopted the controversial law, protests have spread across the country. Tensions have risen in Montenegro after protesters clashed with police. There have been multiple reports of violence.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is calling for a structural change. President Đukanović and the socialist government refuse to abandon their positions and the creation of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Parliamentary elections are due to be held no later than October 2020. Will the new “religious freedom” law have an impact on the election’s outcome? Will the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists finally become the party of opposition? Is this the beginning of the end of Đukanović’s regime? What is the future of Montenegro? All supporters of religious liberty should follow this closely – and draw the appropriate conclusions.

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# Lower taxes, higher giving

Richard Teather

“Conservative voters tend to be more selfish,” a socialist friend recently told me. The allegation is that fiscal conservatives support lower taxes and less government intervention for their own benefit. But is the caricature of someone who has no personal need for welfare spending, and so wants to pay as little as possible towards it, true? I wanted to test the hypothesis against verifiable data.

Of course, there are many reasons besides avarice for opposing government welfare. It is inefficient – not just because it is administered by an often-dysfunctional bureaucracy, but also because politicians regularly fail to direct money where it is most needed. Government spending programs can create perverse incentives, discouraging people from working, encouraging family break-up, and propelling themselves forward by their own inertia.

But stereotypes are not proved or disproved by economics or philosophy. What I wanted to see was how people actually behave. Do supporters of low taxes and smaller government donate their time and resources to charity? Do those who favor high taxes and government intervention personally assist others, or do they substitute demands for wealth redistribution for personal philanthropy?

Abundant evidence from the United States shows that conservatives support

their belief in private charity with their own time and money, while some socialists regard charities as inappropriate rivals to the state. Arthur Brooks, in *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism*, discovered that conservatives give vastly more to philanthropy than statist, despite having lower incomes. That holds true at the community level, as well. Of the top 25 states that give the most to charity, 24 vote Republican.

It isn't just about money. Peter Schweitzer wrote in *Makers and Takers* that conservatives are one-and-a-half times more likely to volunteer at a charity (27 percent vs. 19 percent), and nearly three times as likely to believe it is important to “get happiness from putting others' needs ahead of their own” (55 percent vs. 20 percent). Conservatives are even more likely to give blood.

But those data come from the U.S. Do they reflect American exceptionalism or the strong influence of the “Religious Right”? (It should be noted that Brooks found conservatives still give more to charity when all religious donations are excluded.) Do other countries display the same tendencies?

There is certainly one difference between the U.S. and the UK: Whereas there is plenty of American research into correlations between charitable giving and political beliefs, there is almost none in Great Britain. The Charities Aid Foundation, which provides administrative services to other charities, publishes an annual “Giving Report” that delves deeply into the demographics of charitable donors, comparing them by age, sex, religion – virtually everything but political views. There is only one brief paragraph in its 2017 report on the issue, with the unsurprising news that “those who voted for the Green Party ... are significantly more likely to have given to conservation charities” and “those who voted for UKIP [the party that spearheaded Brexit] ... are significantly less likely than any other party to have given to overseas aid.” Interestingly, the charity must have collected political data but not published anything on how they correlate with overall levels of charitable giving.

However, there is one study on how political views affect practical philanthropy in Great Britain. The owners of the online charity fundraising platform

JustGiving worked with a group of universities to survey the website's users. Political views were included.

In line with the American experience, this survey found that the biggest political group amongst those who donated to charity through the JustGiving website were Conservative voters. Among those who expressed a political viewpoint, 34 percent of JustGiving's donors were Conservatives and 32 percent supported the Labour Party. This was at a time when Labour was comfortably ahead in opinion polls.

Overall, that makes Conservative voters proportionately more likely to give to charity than Labour voters. At the time (2010 to 2011), some 41 percent of the population supported the Labour Party, but they made up only 32 percent of donors to charity. In contrast, Conservatives at the time made up 37 percent of voters and 34 percent of donors, roughly in proportion. (The level of party support is based on 345 published opinion polls from the UK Polling Report website, over the same time period as the JustGiving survey.) If anything, this probably underestimates Conservatives' charitable donations. As an online donation platform, JustGiving likely serves a younger demographic than donors in general, and young people are more likely to be left-wing.

Not that Conservatives rank highest proportionately. Some 22 percent of donors were Liberal Democrats at a time when only 11 percent of the population supported the party. However, the Liberal Democrats broadly favour the free market. Then-leader Nick Clegg was in a coalition with former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and backed the “Big Society” initiative, which was designed to “lift the burden of bureaucracy,” “empower communities to do things their own way,” and “diversify the supply of public services.” So, the principle holds.

As with Americans, UK citizens on “the Right” are more likely to give to charity than those on “the Left.” This seems to be an international trend, which undercuts the claim that conservatives are selfish.

Those who advocate a basically free-market philosophy support private charity initiatives more than those who accept socialist tax-and-spend policies



and wealth redistribution.

Donors' motivations also prove illuminating. By far the two most common reasons they gave the JustGiving survey for choosing to donate to a charity were:

- “the cause and/or mission of the charity” – 79.1 percent said that this was “very important”; and
- “a sense that my money will be used efficiently and effectively” – 68.3 percent saw this as “very important.”

In contrast, the urgent “emergency” appeals made by some charities do not seem to resonate with donors:

- Only a third (33.4 percent) saw the fact that “the charity urgently needs funds (e.g., after a disaster)” as a “very important” reason to give;
- About a third (32.5 percent) saw being “personally affected by a cause” as a “very important” reason to give; and
- Barely a tenth (10.6 percent) saw media “coverage of a specific charity or cause” as a very important motivator.

This means that those who support fiscally conservative, tax-cutting political parties – and believe that private ini-

tiatives are a better way to help those in need than taxpayer-funded welfare programs – are more likely to give to charity. And it indicates that the main motivations of people who donate are the desire to choose where their money goes, and to know that it will be used efficiently. This is in stark contrast to government spending, which is often misdirected by politicians and squandered by bureaucrats.

Rather than the stereotype of selfishness, it seems that, where it actually matters, conservatives and those who want a smaller government follow through on their beliefs of funding philanthropy outside government. On the other hand, statist – despite claiming that they support increased government action to help the poor – are noticeably less likely to take personal initiative to help others. For them, supporting the government seems to replace concrete action.

This is only one survey in the UK, but it correlates with the much more abundant data from across the transatlantic sphere, especially in the United States. Conservatives are not selfish; they are personally generous.

Looking at the wider picture, markets are often a better solution to poverty than government spending; the biggest reduction in poverty the world has ever seen is the billion people lifted out of

absolute poverty by the opportunities offered by globalisation. That has taken place overwhelmingly in countries that have embraced global markets and, notably, not among the main recipients of government-to-government aid.

For those of us who wish to help others, including Christians following the Bible’s injunction to love our neighbour, it is perfectly rational to reject taxation and government spending in favor of other methods. Many private charitable initiatives deliver better results than the government – and solve problems caused by the government. For example, UK food banks alleviate delays caused by the government’s bureaucratic welfare system.

Therefore, people who are broadly conservative have both philosophical and practical reasons to support charities, whether they are motivated by belief in the efficiency of the free market, love of Burke’s “little platoons,” or the Sermon on the Mount. And more to the point, they act on their convictions. It is worthwhile both to note the action and to spread the philosophical, theological, and economic views that catalyze it.

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FEATURE

# Social media censorship: Regulation or innovation?

Ed Morrow

Photo: Mark Zuckerberg in 2018. (Photo credit: Anthony Quintano, CC BY 2.0)

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In the past, when some wild-bearded rebel emerged from the jungle to cry “Revolution!” and tried to topple the *generalissimo* of some humid non-democracy, among the first things on his to-do list was to take over the radio and television stations and newspapers. This was because controlling the news was extremely important. If the rebels could convince the nation that the revolution was desirable, or unstoppable, the *generalissimo*’s soldiers might drop their rifles, as his cronies scamper for the border and tap into their Swiss bank accounts. *El Jefe* could then be introduced to a firing squad while the populace blinked up at a new flag and fingered currency bearing unfamiliar faces.

Today, we have more than radio, television, and newspapers as news sources for the power-hungry to covet. Websites, search engines, and social media are the new instruments of political power.

A majority of Americans get their news from news websites (33 percent) or social media (20 percent), according to a Pew Research Center survey from August 2018. Young people were nearly twice as likely to rely on social media (36 percent). These numbers suggest that, in time, news websites will remain strong and social media’s influence will grow. These will likely provide the best avenues for those seeking political power by controlling the news.

Google’s search engine is the preeminent way to find information on the internet, becoming the most-visited website in the world, but Google hasn’t been an impartial guide. It has bent to governments demanding censorship, most notably Communist China. There, Google participated in “The Great Firewall of China,” until criticism caused it to back out. Censorship, however, can be subtler than the e-thuggery Red China employs. It can be disguised as pious fact-checking, or it can be inherent in an algorithm that disadvantages certain viewpoints. Conservatives have good reason not to trust Google to provide a level playing field.

During Barack Obama’s administration, Google representatives attended White House meetings more than once a week on average, *The Intercept* reported.

During the 2016 election cycle, employees of Google’s parent company, Alphabet Inc., and its subsidiaries donated \$5,870,470 to Democrats, according to GovPredict.com, while donating just \$403,042 to Republicans. Their donations to Hillary Clinton’s campaign did not produce the desired result. A leaked video released in September 2018 vividly revealed the emotional reaction of Google executives to Hillary Clinton’s defeat.

After Clinton’s loss, Google executives held a “woke” wake, where they wept and hugged, discussed white male privilege, and pondered the options for employees who wanted to leave the United States because of Donald Trump’s election. CFO Ruth Porat promised that Google would “use the great strength, and resources, and reach we have to continue to advance really important values.” Google followed up by incorporating a clumsy fact-checking feature into its search engine. This was justified as “providing users with context around stories, so that they can know the bigger picture.” A Daily Caller News Foundation investigation exposed how the feature targeted conservative news sources while ignoring liberal bias. Google removed it in 2018, but claims of Google manipulating search results remain.

Unfortunately, conservative content does not have to be censored to be slighted. Journalists are predominately left-leaning, so any news search is likely to produce left-leaning results. The common impulse is to click on the top results returned by a search already biased toward

results and, even then, they may be buried under left-leaning analysis. The eventual outcome is unsurprising. A study conducted by Allsides.com in 2018 revealed that the Google News homepage returned results that were 75 percent left-leaning, 20 percent centrist, and just five percent right-leaning.

Not only does this lessen the exposure of conservative sites, but it also reduces the ad revenue they generate. YouTube, which is owned by Google, is the foremost venue for video sharing. It lets content creators post their creations, while it sells ad space accompanying their videos. The makers receive a share of the ad revenue if their video is viewed the required number of times. In 2016, in response to complaints, YouTube allowed advertisers, who previously had no control over where their ads were placed, to choose not to have them accompany videos with which they didn’t want to be associated. This led to some creators being demonetized. This was called the “Adpocalypse,” for its catastrophic effect on creators who relied on ad income. While some videos warranted ad removal, the threat of “cancel culture” boycotts could scare squeamish advertisers away from videos advancing conservative ideals.

A disrespectful video of a Japanese suicide victim led to an “Adpocalypse 2.0,” in which YouTube increased the threshold a creator must pass to earn remuneration. Conservative creators with small audiences were cut off from compensation. A squabble between progressive commentator Carlos Maza and conservative

talk show host and humorist Steven Crowder produced “Adpocalypse 3.0.” It led YouTube to place great reliance on an algorithm to identify content containing hate speech or other

forbidden material. It blindly demonetized or deplatformed channels that cover sensitive issues. One channel set up to teach high schoolers about World War II was removed because it included video of the Nazis, a vital part of covering that war. A similar politically correct AI effort, a YouTube fact-checking program designed to counter the spread of conspiracy theories, failed in 2019 when it displayed text debunking 9/11 plots next to the video of

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**“If conservatives want their truths told, they will have to create more content, resist censorship, find sources of revenue, and claim their place in social media.”**

one side. This increases those websites’ traffic and, as the Google search engine values traffic, those sites are more likely to rank first in future searches. Since there are fewer right-leaning news sites, fewer are returned in any search, and they will come lower in the results. This reduces their traffic, pushing them even lower in future search results. Only when specific search terms found on conservative sites are used are they likely to be returned as

the Notre Dame cathedral fire.

Some creators, who left YouTube because of censorship or because they were demonetized, sought financial support through Patreon. This platform allows creators of videos and other art to receive donations from supporters, in exchange for a cut of the proceeds. In 2018 Patreon banned commentators Milo Yiannopoulos, James Allsup, and Carl Benjamin (better known as “Sargon of Arkkad”). Consequently, some who had sought support for conservative and libertarian views through Patreon, which had previously declared a belief in free speech, are now seeking to establish a similar service with a stronger commitment to viewpoint freedom.

Social media offered a less centralized alternative to “corporate” news. Skipping the intermediate steps of reporter, editor, and publisher, news was being reported by “citizen journalists.” The news might be insignificant – such as the cute thing Tiddles did with his toy mouse or what Tiffany thought about her ex-friend Brandi – but there were also personal accounts of hurricanes, near-instant reports of mass shootings, and real-time reactions to presidential debates.

The numbers reveal social media’s gargantuan reach. Twitter has 126 million daily users. Snapchat has 210 million daily users. Reddit has 330 million users. As of September 2019, 1.62 billion people on average log onto Facebook daily.

Inevitably, ugly content appeared, and every social media platform enacted censorship policies. Facebook has a guidebook detailing the content it blocks. Most of it is common sense: no terrorism, child pornography, cannibalism, etc. In February 2019, *The Verge* published an article describing the harsh life of Facebook content moderators, faced with thousands of images of atrocious violence and perversion. It is hard to imagine an eight-hour day doing what they do, 40-hours a week, week after week. But content moderators also screen for politically incorrect material, and here conservatives tend to get poor treatment. In 2018, for example, moderators pulled videos posted by Prager University which criticized conditions in Islamic countries and the current state of masculinity, branding them Islamophobic and sexist.

Facebook has recently been criticized by the Left for not fact-checking political ads. Politicians such as Elizabeth

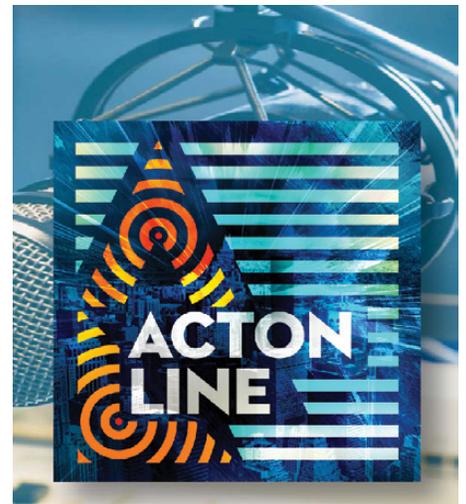
Warren and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez believe that some sort of review panel should be permitted to grade the veracity of these ads. While a private entity is free to deny a platform to anyone, establishing the platform’s opaque processes as semi-official judges of truth in our elections is troubling.

Twitter’s chief executive, Jack Dorsey, evaded the issue by announcing that Twitter would ban all political ads. Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg has resisted fact-checking but is said to be considering labeling ads as not fact-checked, capping the number of ads a single candidate can run at a time, and banning ads in the three days leading up to an election. Conservatives are leery of such restrictions, while progressives want more, despite being hostile to Facebook. Billionaire George Soros, who has put millions of his own fortune into progressive causes, claimed at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos that Zuckerberg is conspiring with Trump to help Trump win re-election. Perhaps it was a gambit to pressure Zuckerberg into accepting the fact-checking of political ads as a way to distance himself from Trump.

It is unlikely conservatism will overcome the Left’s dominance of the news media. But if conservatives want their truths told, they will have to create more content, resist censorship, find sources of revenue, and claim their place in social media. There is reason for optimism. Conservatives have produced media surprises. Rush Limbaugh revitalized AM radio, making it the rare conservative-dominated medium. Fox News set up a “fair and balanced” alternative to the unified choir of ABC/NBC/CBS/CNN/PBS. President Trump turned Twitter into a pointy stick to jab his way through the legacy media’s coverage, which has been 90 percent negative, and communicate directly with the American people.

Who knows? Perhaps there is a conservative entrepreneur with a neatly trimmed beard who wants to help facilitate the next communications revolution.

*Ed Morrow is an author and illustrator who lives in Vermont with his wife, Laurie, and their son, Ned. Morrow’s books include The Halloween Handbook, 599 Things You Should Never Do, and The Grim Reaper’s Book of Days. His work has appeared in National Review, The American Spectator, and many other outlets.* 



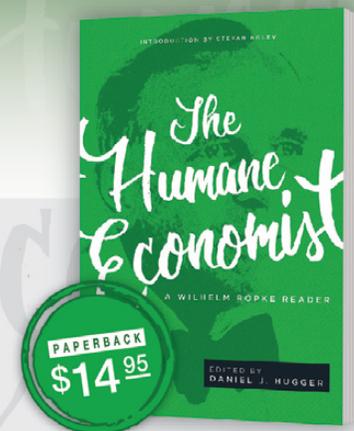
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# CARDINAL STEFAN WYSZYŃSKI (1901-1981)

Marcin Rzegocki

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was born in 1901 in eastern Poland, then part of Russia. In 1924, he was ordained a priest. He earned a Ph.D. in canon law and, during World War II, served as a chaplain with the Home Army, a Polish resistance organization. In 1946, he was ordained Bishop of Lublin and, in 1948, became the Primate of Poland. In 1953, the year of Stalin's death, the Vatican elevated him to cardinal.

Wyszyński initiated an agreement with the Communist government of Poland to guarantee the basic rights of Catholics. Contrary to his critics, this came from his sober analysis of the socio-political circumstances, rather than his sympathy to Communist ideology. When it became evident the state would not keep its promises, the bishops issued a new document known as "*Non possumus*," highlighting the persecution of the church in Poland, especially state attempts to control the appointment of bishops. "If external factors would prevent us from appointing competent people to spiritual positions, we are determined to leave them unfilled, rather than to give the religious rule of souls to unworthy hands," Polish bishops wrote.

The letter was the last straw for Communist officials, who arrested the primate in September 1953. Cardinal Wyszyński spent more than three years in isolation in remote parts of Poland. Yet he refused government demands that he resign from his ecclesiastical office.

This time of trial provoked intense



intellectual work and prayer. In prison, he wrote his beautiful diary, titled *A Freedom Within: The Prison Notes*. This book reveals his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and her divine Son, which produced his patience and firm confidence in God. Suffering repression was an "honor," he wrote. "I was afraid that I would not have a share in the privilege of other members of my seminary class," who suffered or died in Nazi camps, Soviet gulags, or Polish prisons.

After his liberation in October 1956, Cardinal Wyszyński tried to normalize the relationship between the church in Poland and the government, believing Poland needed peace as a basic condition of social and economic development.

Cardinal Wyszyński earned the nickname "Primate of the Millennium"

by becoming the *spiritus movens* behind the celebration of the millennium of the baptism of Poland. This celebration, which concluded in 1966, was a moral triumph of Catholicism over the Communist rulers. Cardinal Wyszyński took part in the Second Vatican Council and imposed a conservative interpretation of its reforms on his parishes.

In August 1980, when the social tensions reached their height, he pacified the situation. "Above all, today's difficulties require peace, stability, prudence, and responsibility," said the cardinal on August 1980 at the national Marian shrine in Częstochowa, the spiritual capital of the anti-Communist movement. He underlined parental rights and upheld the family as the primary unit of social order, as well as the right to life. "The order of family life requires: liberty of religion, liberty of culture, security of family life," he stated.

In the economic difficulties of the 1980s, the cardinal warned Poles that the excessive desire for material goods would increase the national debt. He said a better future comes from honest work, which has both economic and spiritual dimensions. At the same time, he publicly reminded the government about basic property rights, the basis of human development.

Cardinal Wyszyński passed away in 1981. Pope Francis approved a decree for his beatification on October 3, 2019.

*Marcin Rzegocki earned his Ph.D. from the Warsaw School of Economics.*

# The solution to ‘cancel culture’ is true community

Bradley J. Birzer

I remember well the first time someone told me about the existence of the world wide web and the possibility of electronic mail. It was the spring of 1992, and I was in my second year of graduate school. I was thrilled with the possibility of sending mail without paying for U.S. postage and, as a rather hardcore libertarian, I felt this was the best way to circumvent the government monopoly on the postal service. However, I soon noticed that the new technology brought changes into my life.

Prior to this, I had prided myself on writing seven-, eight-, or even nine-page handwritten letters. My family and friends had filled our letters with news, with details of great adventures, with reviews of the latest books we had read and music we had heard. We filled the entire page with snippets of poems or lyrics, with some rather inexpert doodles; sometimes, I'd paste photos into the letter or squiggle in some band name such as Rush, Talk Talk, or Yes. There was an individualistic art to long-form letter correspondence.

I still have boxes and files full of these letters received from friends, and I cherish them as some of my finest possessions. I hope and trust the recipients of my letters feel the same. These letters represent small but mighty little communities: neighborhoods, suburbs, towns, republics, and – sometimes – dynasties of letters.

Now, I look at my computer and shudder. My inbox contains 10,763 unread messages and another 5,604 in the “junk folder,” predestined there by some algorithm I'll never comprehend. (Calvin would scratch his head, as well.) When I look across social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, I see anger – lots of it, on every hand. Mostly, though, I see a modern form of the ancient heresy of Manichaenism arise in all of its viciousness, pitting us against them. This is not how I envisioned communications developing all those years ago.

In his magisterial *Letters from Lake Como*, the German-Italian philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini argued that one could judge any technology by its humane quality. Does it leaven the human experience or diminish it? Does it make us more human or less human? Is it at our scale, or does it overwhelm us? Among the greatest of Christian humanists, Guardini was not alone in such an analysis and a fear. He shared them with Thomas Merton, Russell Kirk, J.R.R. Tolkien, E.F. Schumacher, C.S. Lewis, and Wilhelm Röpke.

As Aristotle famously wrote, the human person, by nature, is meant to live in community. Only in community do we sharpen our excellent qualities, attenuate our weaknesses, and pursue our acts of charity. Yet, what is community, and how does one come to love, understand, shape, and delimit community?

The grand Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke argued that our true affections must begin at the most local and immediate level possible, recognizing what the Roman Catholics call subsidiarity, a manifestation of power at its most personal. We do not love abstractions such as the nation, for example, but we do love our fathers, our mothers, our siblings, our uncles and aunts, our cousins, our friends, our mentors, and our neighbors. Burke wrote:

We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting-places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality.

Indeed, unless we love that which is near, we will never love that which is distant. Only by loving those who nurture and guide us can we begin to love those who protect them. Once we love our neighbors, we might love our country (if our country is lovely) and, from there, all creation.

Here's the rub: When we write a letter



to an individual or to a small group of individuals (say, a family), we create and leaven community. However, when we post something on Facebook or Twitter, we are creating abstractions of communities, not tangible ones. To put it in Burkean terms, a handwritten letter strengthens our little platoon. To tweet, though, has us screaming at the abstraction of a nation. As such, the intensely personal becomes the profoundly public, and, yet, it all remains personal.

At their worst, Facebook and Twitter destroy all bonds among women and men, and each person and each community loses touch with its past, with reality and its future. As such, it resembles what the great Harvard scholar Irving Babbitt wrote about the collectivist notions of the state. In pursuing an abstract collectivism, the state destroys “its historical continuity, its permanent self, as it were, that unites its present with its past and future. By an unprincipled facility in changing the state such as is encouraged by Rousseau’s impressionistic notion of the general will, the generations of men can no more link with one another than the flies of a summer. They are disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality.”

One could write something similar about the nastiest parts of social media. We become, each, flies of the summer in the collectivist morass of anger and division.

There is, of course, a huge, massive,

gargantuan flaw in my argument, as well as in the arguments of Guardini and his allies, regarding technology. Technologies become humane through our own free will. That is, with proper ethics and understanding, we can do much to keep our technologies from escaping our own control and taking on a fate of their own. Yes, Facebook and Twitter can be brutal. But, they can also be beautiful. How many times have I sighed deeply and happily when seeing my friends and my former students – spread throughout the world – posting pictures of births and achievements? How many times have I sighed deeply and sadly when seeing my friends and my former students relating news of deaths and setbacks?

As angry and sad as social media can make me, the times in which it has done more good than harm are countless beyond calculation. With one Facebook friend, I started a lecture series. With another Facebook friend, I wrote a progressive rock album. With yet another Facebook friend, I lamented the loss of a family member. As I look across Facebook – a social network to which I’ve belonged for over a decade now – I see friends I’ve never actually met, but for and with whom I would gladly buy a beer, attend a concert (or a baptism), or start a political party. Last fall, I finally got to meet one of my oldest Facebook friends, Charles in New York. After all the encouragement we have given each other

the past half-decade, our hugs were frequent and sincere. This very article came about because of a friendship on Twitter.

One of my favorite rock musicians, Mark Hollis (RIP), wrote a song in the 1980s, “Life is What You Make It.” It’s a catchy Steve Winwood-style track, and it revels, rather stoically, in the mysteries of free will. After all, nothing forces me not to write long, handwritten letters. Nothing forces me to be on social media. Nothing on social media forces me to react bitterly.

I still choose, as do you.

The next time you are on social media, and you see something bitingly absurd, forgive it, bless it, and sanctify it. See an anti-Semitic comment? Post a picture of Simon Wiesenthal without comment. See something anti-Christian? Post a passage from St. John. See something supporting abortion? Post a picture of an adorable baby. That is, every time we see the inhumane, we can choose to make it humane. We can make the technology work for humanity, not against it. In the end, we will all be a bit happier. After all, life, like social media, is what we make it.

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# Should the government regulate social media content?

Anne Rathbone Bradley

Some conservatives believe that the left-wing or progressive bias of social media giants like Facebook is so egregious that the only solution is to have the federal government regulate the content. In 2019 Mark Zuckerberg himself, founder and CEO of Facebook, called for more government regulation of the internet. This raises the question: Can the government do this in an unbiased fashion which properly respects the freedom of speech?

To ask for the government to be the arbiter of internet content assumes that the government has the knowledge to do this, the understanding of what content is “bad” and requires removal or reform, and that it can do all of these things in an unbiased manner. Essentially, it requires the state itself to be unbiased, which it is not. The two key problems in asking for the state to regulate content come down to knowing what to do and doing it in an even-handed manner. States are incapable of either. This is true whether we are talking about the central allocation of scarce resources or whether it can control politicized or harmful information.

Nobel Laureate economist F.A. Hayek, in his groundbreaking article “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” helps us understand that the knowledge that we need to make use of in society does not exist in concentrated form, but rather is decentralized and local. No one has access to “data” in entirety. Thus, we need decentralized planning mechanisms. In markets, prices help us gather this decentralized knowledge so that we can plan. They work, because they are themselves decentralized.

The same principle applies to the current debate over social media content. Social media is a clearinghouse of decentralized posts, information that can be used for both good and bad. Facebook is organic; individuals and firms add content for many reasons. This content can be used by politicians and firms for strategic reasons. In reality, both want your vote: Firms want you to shop with them, and politicians want you to vote for them and support them financially. This obviously lends itself to false claims, exaggerations, harmful content, misinformation, and outright propaganda. Businesses have less of an incentive to do this because, once you purchase their product, you as consumer are the arbiter of whether the product lives up to its marketing hype. If it does not, and there are many alternatives, you will likely stop shopping there. This is successful, as it disciplines firms to be truthful.

The analogy does not extend to political markets. There are no prices, no profits and losses. If politicians who want your vote do not tell the truth, or even spread falsehoods about their competitors, it is more difficult to “punish” them. If they win, you

must wait until the next election cycle to try to vote them out. And this only works when large numbers of your fellow citizens want to vote them out. Nobel Laureate James Buchanan said it well: There is no political counterpart to Adam Smith’s invisible hand. Because the state itself is a monopoly, and run as a bureaucracy, there are no market mechanisms to help it with our problems: knowing what to do, knowing how to do it, and doing it “fairly.”

So, what are we left with? The dangers of harmful and false content on social media platforms are real and need governance, but that does not mean they need government. Republicans are wrong to ask the state to arbitrate social media posts, because it will be politically managed. Thus, it will entirely depend on who holds power and has the power to change the rules.

The best defense here is that we all need to be guardians of the culture. A vibrant free market requires a certain ethos: prudence, virtue, truth-seeking, and competition. This includes the competition of ideas. The best way to defeat false information is to ensure that all ideas have a platform, so the ideas can compete, and truth can win. The best thing for Facebook would be for people to call out falsehoods and bring attention to them. This way, harmful and dangerous content which violates life and liberty can be regulated by Facebook itself and its users, and the dangerous content can be eliminated. False political information is not best vetted by government nor the employees of Facebook – as this, too, will lend itself to their bias – but rather by allowing all political content to have space and to let the users sort through it. Zuckerberg himself has defended this claim more than once recently: He believes the users need to evaluate political ads themselves.

The principles that encourage freedom in markets are the same principles we should rely on to sort through the brave new world of social media.

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ESSAY

# Sin and vice do not belong in the GDP

John Horvat II

Economics can be a brutal science. Its focus is limited to a particular part of human activity that deals with the process of wealth creation, acquisition, production, and consumption. It measures what has, and not what should have, been done. Economics is also a science of measurements. By calculating profits and losses, businessmen can plan for the future. On a larger scale, international standards of measurement help economists develop monetary policy, make economic forecasts, and monitor growth. But greed, fraud, and theft can easily find their way into financial transactions. That is why economics must be subject to those higher normative sciences like ethics that regulate all human behavior.

However, there is increasing pressure to change the moral dimension of economic measurements. Traditionally, economic figures only dealt with the value of legal activities. Now officials are arguing that illegal transactions should also be included.

According to the *Wall Street Journal's* Jo Craven McGinty, the main force behind the push for including illegal activities in standards is the United Nations. The UN promotes its System of National Accounts, or SNA, as the universal standard of economic analysis. The SNA includes the familiar

Gross Domestic Product, which is a calculation of all goods and services in a country for a given year, as part of its metrics.

However, United Nations officials promoting adoption of the SNA increasingly recommend that nations include illegal goods and activities like drugs, prostitution, illicit gambling, and business theft. They claim such “transactions” represent a significant amount of economic activity. Excluding them, they argue, will distort GDP and ruin the uniformity of analysis.

Five years ago, the European Union began including illegal activities in its national accounting. Others followed suit by adopting the SNA's guidelines. Participating governments can record no direct benefits from the metrics, since the activities are still illegal and, therefore, not taxable. However, they claim the practice will help set policy.

Although the amount of illegal activity is not easy to estimate, it is enormous, perhaps amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars. Canada has especially focused on its illicit cannabis sales which, despite the legalization of marijuana, still account for 0.4 percent of its GDP. Estimates of unlawful activities in the United States are around one percent of GDP. Theft from business alone would add \$109 billion to the total amount of national “goods and services.”

The only real obstacle to the universal adoption of the SNA standards is the United States. It is not ready to include these figures on its fiscal portfolio. Thankfully, it has kept illegal gambling, theft, drugs, and prostitution off the official ledger.

The SNA debate over adding vices and illegal goods to the metrics is a typical expression of modern economics divorced from ethics. The SNA would reduce economics to the mere mechanics of commodity exchange, irrespective of whether

the activity measured is constructive or destructive. It is this indifference that is wrong.

The SNA's proponents at the UN fail to consider that theft and corruption destroy the fabric of society. Economic transactions involve moral and ethical actions. They create relationships that increase social cohesion or undermine the rule of law. Entrepreneurs must trust that their business partners will fulfill the terms of their contract, and employers must trust that their employees won't pilfer from the store while they're away. Economic measures that treat the theft of an item no differently than its sale fall short of their purpose.

There is yet another objection to such indifference, which the Western tradition has upheld from Aristotle to America's Founding Fathers. Sinful habits corrupt a people, but limited government and free markets depend on virtuous citizens. A lawless or vice-driven society cannot experience flourishing in any regard, including long-term economic growth. Nations abandon these links to their peril.

Saint Thomas Aquinas defines the virtue of justice as “to render to each one his own.” Justice facilitates virtue by clearly defining the terms of ownership, thus diminishing discord. Economics focuses on commutative justice, which is the particular kind of justice that assures that one party will render to another in transactions what is due. Justice ties trade to moral actions in favor of the common good and away from exaggerated self-interest and short-term gain. Justice creates the trust and security that allow markets to flourish.

When economists admit business theft as a metric for economic analysis, they break this trust. Injustice takes an equal place beside justice. Immoral actions like prostitution – that offend human dignity and God's law – line up alongside professions of honor and decency. It is a formula for failure.

Standards of measurement are important in economics and must be employed judiciously. However, economies fail much more by the lack of moral metrics than by want of statistical analysis. The basis of economic thought must be a passion for the cardinal virtue that should govern all transactions: justice.

*John Horvat II is a scholar, researcher, educator, international speaker, and author of the book Return to Order. He is also the vice president of the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property.* [R&L](#)



ESSAY

# Brexit: A new era dawns

Rev. Richard Turnbull

Forty-seven tortured years have come to an end. The United Kingdom joined the European Union on January 1, 1973, and left at 11 p.m. on January 31, 2020. The UK suffered nearly five decades of the step-by-step erosion of the idea of the free nation state. The relationship was dominated by attempts to impose a common currency (which the UK repeatedly rejected), extract excessive financial demands to subsidise other countries (to which Margaret Thatcher famously replied, “We want our money back”), and inexorable moves toward a single political union (which, again, Thatcher emphatically rejected). We never really belonged in the EU, and the UK’s national character has been restored.

Those who wanted the United Kingdom to remain a member of the European Union missed a fundamental point. In the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum, Michael Ashcroft’s polling company interviewed more than 12,000 people about why they voted Leave. The results were as follows:

- Sovereignty – 49 per cent;
- Immigration – 33 per cent;
- Fear of EU expansion – 13 per cent; and
- Economics – 6 per cent.

The mistake made by the Remain establishment – and, indeed, most of the British establishment, from politics, to big business, to the Church of England, backed “Remain” – was to argue the next three years about economics. Leaving the EU will threaten jobs, damage trade, and lead to food shortages, they declaimed. There is, of course, an economic case for leaving the EU, but the point that was missed was that Brexit was really about a fundamental desire of humanity: our thirst for liberty. The Remain side argued about things which were not the prime motivators of the Leave voters. Indeed, one might argue that “sovereignty,” “immigration,” and “fear of EU expansion” are all expressions of the same issue: sovereign control over laws, borders, and finances. One way or another, some 94 per cent of respondents were effectively motivated by sovereignty or political liberty.

In a very real sense, this was symptomatic of the Remain problem. They spent the entire time from the referendum to the December 2019 general election using every means at their disposal to frustrate the clearly expressed will of the people in a national ballot. Parliamentary procedure was manipulated, the Speaker of the House enlisted, the Supreme Court used and abused. The left-of-center Labour Party had a particular problem in that, although it is clearly a Remain party, perhaps around a quarter of its electors voted Leave and they were concentrated in electoral districts in the midlands and north of England.

The earthquake occurred on December 12, when around 50 of these voting districts flipped from Labour to Conservative, many for the first time ever. The BBC (think CNN funded by compulsory taxation) missed

what was happening completely. When Boris Johnson visited a chemical works in the northeast of England, the broadcaster showed a woman asking a question designed to trip up Johnson (who sort of obliged). What they did not show was 20 men in hard hats, safety jackets, and hardened faces holding up a sign saying, “We love Boris.” The seat flipped.

The road ahead is strewn with obstacles designed to push our newly free nation off course. Prime Minister Johnson himself is an enigma; on his watch, more big government, state intervention, and government spending may be the order of the day. In addition, there are many with a vested interest in Brexit’s failure. Yet, there are unique and broad opportunities to strike a blow for liberty in at least three areas.

First, political freedom must be expanded. There are already suggestions that any future arrangement between the UK and the EU will include the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. In the memorable words of Thatcher, “No, no, no.” Reclaiming sovereignty for the nation and the elected British Parliament does not mean immediately surrendering that hard-won victory back to the EU. We also need to beware of the Supreme Court, whose activist judges sought to frustrate Brexit. Perhaps constitutional reform will need to go further.

Second, the UK can seize all the benefits of economic liberty. There will undoubtedly be a battle between those who wish UK trade and regulatory standards to remain aligned with the EU in return for zero tariffs and so-called frictionless trade. This is a siren song. If that were the objective, there would be little point in leaving the single market, the customs union, or the EU itself. We need to encourage a new outlook for trade that champions innovation, the free exchange of goods and services, and consumer choice. The freedom to negotiate trade deals and arrangements with our closest allies like the United States – which has been illegal whilst we have been members of the EU – or any other sovereign country that wishes to trade to mutual advantage lies at the heart of the opportunities that beckon after Brexit. Increased choice for the consumer (maybe Brits would prefer to buy American goods rather than French), price competition (Tim Martin, a leading pro-Brexit businessman, is adamant

Photo: (credit: Shutterstock.com)

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he can cut prices in his pubs because he will be able to import from outside the EU more cheaply), and tariff reduction (will the Germans want tariffs on all the cars they sell in the UK?) are all examples of the opportunities of trade freedom.

The EU single market concept is predicated on a common regulatory framework. Again, the cries will be that we must continue to follow this common framework or else our standards will decline. Divergence, though, is a virtue. The regulatory standards that the UK seeks may be higher than those offered by the EU, or, perhaps, they might just be different. Perhaps we might benefit from less, rather than more, regulation. The consumer is more than able to assess the relationship of price and quality; a centrally imposed framework is simply not necessary. Divergence expands choice.

Third, Brexit will bring new opportunities for inward investment, encouraging technological innovation, low corporate and personal tax regimes, and celebrating entrepreneurial success. Just watch the pressure for keeping tax rates high in order to “avoid a race to the bottom.” We should instead consider reducing corporate taxation to encourage more companies to invest and employ more workers. Why not undercut France’s tax regime? The resulting prosperity will improve the well-being of society and create more prosperity to fund philanthropy, including religious charities and churches.

There will be many pressures going forward. Yet, there is also opportunity, a real opening for something different: a nation state that celebrates freedom, trades freely, rewards success, and encourages personal responsibility. Economic liberty inspires competition and choice and is wed to political freedom.

Forty-seven tortured years have come to an end, and a new era beckons.

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**BOOK**

# John Foster Dulles: The devil’s (not) in the details

John D. Wilsey

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I did not like John Foster Dulles when I first met him.

Of course, I have never actually met him; he died 10 years before I was born. But I have been studying him and writing about him for seven years now. And I first encountered him almost 30 years ago, while I was a student majoring in history at Furman University.

Back then, I was taking a course on “U.S. history since 1945” with one of my academic heroes, Dr. Marian Strobel, who still teaches at Furman. Dulles came up a lot in that course. John Foster Dulles was instrumental in the formation of the United Nations, served on the postwar Council of Foreign Ministers, led the negotiations which produced the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951 that formally ended hostilities with Japan, and held the position of United States Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959 in the Eisenhower administration. When Dulles died in 1959, he was nearly universally regarded as a titan of sagacity, a paragon of the statesman, and the embodiment of American prestige. His state funeral was the largest in the history of the nation’s capital to that date, surpassed just four-and-a-half years later by that of President John F. Kennedy.

But Dulles’ star faded considerably in the years following his death, largely because by the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Americans began to regard the anti-Communist interventions which took place during the 1950s in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa with regret and disgust. In 1973, Townsend Hoopes’ *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* was published, which was the first critical biography and assessment of Dulles’ work as a lawyer and a diplomat. One can tell by the title that Hoopes’ work did not offer a positive take. More negative treatments of Dulles came out over the years, and only one of them can be said to offer a critical, yet balanced, treatment: Ronald Pruessen’s *John Foster Dulles: The Road to Power* (1982).

The most recent treatment of Dulles appeared in 2013, and it can fairly be called a hit job. Stephen Kinzer’s *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* was a full-throated condemnation of Dulles as a simplistic, puritanical jingoist. In a 2014 interview on *The Brothers*, Kinzer said that Dulles was “arrogant, self-righteous, and prudish .... even his friends didn’t like him.” He went so far as to lay the entire blame for America’s involvement and subsequent failure in Vietnam at Dulles’ feet. “We could have avoided the entire American involvement in Vietnam” if Dulles had not insisted on it as early as 1954, Kinzer asserted.

Dulles deserves a more fair and accurate treatment. For one thing, every history of a particular event, person, idea, or movement is taken from the perspective of the historian’s own context and background. And every biography contains a bit of the author’s autobiography. I have studied Dulles carefully over the past several years, and I can admit that at first, I was convinced by Dulles’ detractors of their contention that his actions as an American diplomat were, on the whole, bad for America’s standing in the world. But as I considered the human being behind the caricatures, I began to get a different perspective. More specifically, as I studied Dulles as a religious man, I came to understand his positions and decisions during the 1940s and 1950s more comprehensively.

Most of Dulles’ biographers failed to treat Dulles’ religious life all that seriously. The one exception is Mark Toulouse, who wrote the only book-length religious biography of Dulles in 1986. Toulouse’s *The Transformation of John Foster Dulles* is an excellent study, but only treats 15 years of Dulles’ 71-year life span. I became convinced that

any responsible assessment of Dulles' public life had to start by looking at Dulles' religious faith, beginning with his grandparents and parents, proceeding to his childhood and early adulthood. A perceptive biographer had to note how his religious views evolved around the circumstances of his life and career, at home and in public, over the course of his life.

Among other things, I found that yes, *contra* Kinzer, Dulles' friends did actually like him.

Neglecting the influence of religion on Dulles' life necessarily results in a skewed and inaccurate account of his career. Consider the example of his work on the Treaty of San Francisco, which was ratified by the Senate in 1952.

By 1950, Dulles had become convinced that the Soviet Union was as dire a threat to world peace and human freedom as Nazi Germany had been in the 1930s and 1940s. He wrote that the Soviets "believe it right to use fraud, terrorism, and violence, and any other means that will promote their ends." The Soviet empire was atheistic and operated outside of the moral law, because the Soviets denied its existence. On April 6, 1950, Dulles was appointed foreign policy advisor to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and he began to work as chief negotiator for a treaty of peace with Japan. He made four trips to the Far East in 1950 and 1951, and he enjoyed the full support of Secretary Acheson and President Harry S. Truman.

For Dulles, the animating vision for a peace treaty with Japan was the Christian spirit of reconciliation. In 1919, Dulles had served on the Reparations Commission at the Versailles Conference, which produced the disastrous Versailles Treaty that ended World War I. That treaty was essentially retributive against Germany, and the Second World War was the direct result of the harsh and vengeful treatment of Germany by the Allies.

Dulles actually helped draft the infamous War Guilt Clause, which forced Germany to accept responsibility for the war. But Dulles learned important lessons from that experience, namely, that peace is ensured by magnanimity and forgiveness, not revenge. America had a "special responsibility ... to bring international relations into conformity with moral law," Dulles wrote after the San Francisco Treaty was ratified on March 20, 1952.

The peace treaty with Japan was one of Dulles' most important achievements. The treaty was the cornerstone of peace in the Pacific during the Cold War, and it also served as a bulwark against the spread of Communism into Japan. This spared the nation the ravages of collectivism and socialism, allowing Japan to become not just a U.S. ally, but one of the most prosperous nations in the region. It likely preserved religious liberty, which Marxism extinguishes everywhere it seizes power. Instead of disparaging Dulles as a self-righteous prig, we should offer intelligent assessments based on Dulles as a man, not a character from a Herblock cartoon. Dulles' religion defined his humanity, and compelled him to serve the rest of humanity.

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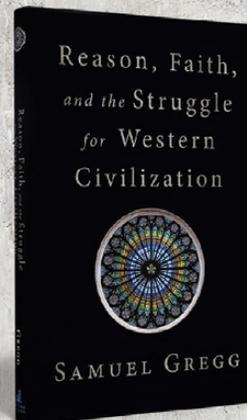
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concept of objective truth itself.

Strong gods can be destructive, as they were in the first half of the twentieth century. “Dark gods stormed through Europe, eventually setting aflame most of the world and bringing death to millions,” he writes. They can lead to eccentricity, as we saw in the age of “militarism, fascism, communism, racism, and anti-Semitism.”

Reno posits that, as a reaction to this destruction, the postwar consensus adopted a system that opposed strong gods *per se*, whether good or evil. The newly adopted mantra held that “whatever is strong – strong loves and strong truths – leads to oppression, while liberty and prosperity require the reign of weak loves and weak truths.” The alleged weakening process, he writes, developed into a “negative piety” in which all objective truth is scorned as “a threat to liberal norms.” Postwar liberalism amounts to the “strong conviction about the danger of strong convictions.”

Reno is “not opposed to the anti-totalitarian struggles of the last century.” Indeed, “by certain measures, the postwar consensus has been remarkably successful” in establishing peace and prosperity. Yet, Reno writes, it has become unhealthy.

Reno analyzes many different thinkers across the postwar political spectrum who, in his opinion, advocated such views: Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Albert Camus, and Jacques Derrida. He writes that they shared a common attempt to disenchant the world, which, in contrast to the pre-war era, was now considered laudable. Instead of trying to nurture strong gods, the West should let technocrats and experts develop impartial policy through scientific, cost-benefit analysis. Economically, the market, through spontaneous order, would lead to a similarly impersonal process. He derides this as “a utopian dream of politics without transcendence, peace without unity, and justice without virtue.”

In a particularly luminous chapter, Reno shows how even architecture has sunk into this world of sameness and simplicity. The great cathedrals of Europe tried to connect buildings with the community, its past, and transcendent truths. Today, architecture “reflects an explicit ideology of negation,” where simple design – or any sign of openness – is considered great, as long as it

BOOK

## Return of the false gods

*Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*

R. R. Reno | Gateway Editions | 2019 | 208 pgs

Reviewed by Kai Weiss

Numerous books have been written in recent years on the demise of liberalism in today’s age of “populism” and social disintegration. The newest entry is *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* by Rusty Reno, the editor of *First Things*. While Reno has been seen as the main protagonist behind that journal’s new, critical view of liberalism, he, in contrast to others, says that this is “not a crisis of liberalism, modernity, or the West.” A liberal society “can be wealthy and moderate,” and “the marketplace can generate wealth and give us elbow room to make up our own minds about how to live.” Those who try to trace “the cancerous tumor that is killing the West” to liberalism or nominalism miss the target. Instead, he sees the “post-war consensus” of “liberalism” at fault.

Throughout his book, Reno returns to the peculiar and vague concept of “strong gods,” which are “the object of men’s love and devotion, the sources of the passions and loyalties that unite societies.” They can include traditions, national or local identities, historical narratives like the American founding, or modern ideologies – such as the



does not relate explicitly to a country's or community's heritage, or offend anyone.

This culture of negative piety leaves societies and individuals ill at ease. By ignoring the possibility of objective truth and replacing it with hyper-personalized values, Western society naturally feels lost. In an uncentered, technocratic world, those who are losing out in the alleged win-win of liberalism need to "worry that they will have no role in the globalized economy."

What is his solution? For Reno, it should be a cautious return of the strong gods: "The political and cultural crisis of the West today is the result of our refusal – perhaps incapacity – to honor the strong gods that stiffen the spine and inspire loyalty." In contrast to the previous century, the West should adopt "noble loves," which must be broadly shared so that genuine community can develop. This requires society to reevaluate the concept of "the common good." Indeed, our world "begs for a politics of loyalty and solidarity."

Yet the identities of these strong, unifying gods remain vague. And although Reno clearly opposes totalitarianism, the concept remains a slippery slope. He mentions the noble

loves of solidarity, country, and religion – but also of self-government, sovereignty, freedom, and reason. But taken to the extreme, any of these gods can create unintended consequences. For instance, extreme solidarity can lead to socialism, extreme patriotism to nationalism of the imperialist variety, extreme freedom to libertinism, and extreme reason to a scientism that rejects faith and tradition on supposedly rational grounds. Postwar liberals' realization that strong gods tend to create fanaticism deserves our gratitude. Many of them correctly argued that moderation creates the stable and cohesive society necessary for these "noble loves" to be followed in a prudent way.

Reno cogently explains how ever-greater openness and diversity eventually lead to disenchantment and a soft totalitarianism. However, he underestimates the positive principles liberalism successfully instituted in the postwar era, like greater equality and justice.

Further, some of the thinkers he accuses of emptiness or negation, such as Hayek, passionately believed in a positive view of society. Indeed, the postwar West is far from devoid of its own "strong gods." The Left believes in equality, social justice, or Mother Earth; libertarians believe in freedom as an inherent good. Just because Reno does not agree with these strong gods does not mean that liberals lack them.

Reno's diagnosis is missing one crucial component of the postwar consensus: the consistent advance of political centralization since 1945. Throughout the book, Reno erroneously argues that postwar politics has favored free markets, free trade, deregulation, and entrepreneurship. It almost seems as if he thinks EU bureaucrats and the Washington "swamp" get their plans from the works of Ayn Rand and Ludwig von Mises.

Over the last seven decades, governments have become more and more intrusive – building lumbering welfare states, which they financed through massive public debt and sky-high taxes,

Reno brilliantly shows how "our leadership class is so thoroughly blinded by the postwar consensus" that it ignores the problems citizens face today, including "atomization, dissolving communal bonds, disintegrating family ties, and a nihilistic culture of limitless self-definition." Why, then, does he still trust these few to govern the many? Why not advance real self-government by decentralizing and strengthening local institutions? Why not include subsidiarity as a strong god? It often seems as though Reno takes centralization for granted, underestimating its damaging effects and its role in the negative piety and social disintegration he diagnoses.

It almost seems that Reno realizes his oversight in his afterword. "Men always rally around the sacred," he writes, so we have to be careful that the public square does not displace the sacred. "We easily imagine the nation as more than our civic home; it is our savior. To combat this idolatry, we need to supplement this political community with "the domestic society of marriage and the supernatural

community of the church, synagogue, and other communities of transcendence." Or, put differently, public life needs to be complemented

by a strengthening of civil society and private institutions.

This is the crucial point to take away from Reno's sometime vague but overall thought-provoking book: A renewal of our society, of our institutions, and, for us Christians, of our faith, is possible. This renewal "will be painfully difficult." It might take time. But "our task is to use our freedom and intelligence in doing so. We must return to the terrain that can be stabilized, though never finally fixed. This is a religious, cultural, and political task. It is ours." It should remain ours, and it can most effectively be achieved when power is devolved from the leadership class into the hands of the people.

*Kai Weiss is the research and outreach coordinator at the Austrian Economics Center and a board member of the Hayek Institute.*

R&L

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## **"By ignoring the possibility of objective truth and replacing it with hyper-personalized values, Western society naturally feels lost."**

and inserting regulations into all areas of private life. Their thirst for centralization has shackled the market through regulation and cronyism. Some national powers have been assumed by supranational organizations like the European Union, constraining the very sovereignty that Reno says he seeks to revitalize. This centralization has hurt social institutions like the family and the church. It leaves people feeling alienated, while a small political elite sets policy for hundreds of millions of strangers.

Due to this oversight, Reno discounts any decentralizing ideas by the postwar thinkers he analyzes. He admits that "only a few actually make the laws." At the same time, he criticizes William F. Buckley Jr. for calling for more pluralism, because "it disperses, rather than concentrates" power, and he lambasts Hayek for arguing in *The Road to Serfdom* that people seek the peace and "freedom to build up once more their own little worlds."

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*The notion of shared values on both sides of the Atlantic has received new attention. Leaders like French socialist president François Hollande cite “democracy, freedoms and the respect of every individual” as key values. But what about religious liberty, the breakdown of the welfare state, advancing secularism and the health of civil society? R&L Transatlantic will cover these issues here with new articles.*

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## THE AGE OF ‘CENSURESHIP’

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

Social media has a large menagerie of critics: politicians on the Left and Right, journalists, and ordinary people who despair over the anger and noise often so prevalent on these platforms. Their concerns are as diverse as those who express them, and some are made on firmer grounds than others.

Politicians of the Left have criticized firms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google (owner of YouTube) for exercising “monopoly power” and demand that they be broken up. These are obviously not monopolies, as the rise of Snapchat and TikTok prove; the slippery notion of “monopoly” seems merely a menacing way to characterize their success with consumers. While nearly three quarters of Americans say they enjoy YouTube, the remaining quarter does not seem at any distinct disadvantage, or under any compulsion to watch. All the other myriad social media platforms (except Facebook) enjoy dramatically less usage, and none of them charge for the core functions they make available to users.

Politicians on the Right have different concerns. One has declared social media to be “addictive.” Addiction is a terrible and tragic evil. Addiction to drugs and alcohol often ruins lives and tears families and communities apart. I know this well from my own pastoral experience. However, the word itself is abused and often trivialized by those applying it to things people do freely but feel guilty about later, e.g., “chocoholics.” Enjoying things, even good things, out of their right measure is wrong, but I am not so sure this is addiction so much as vice.

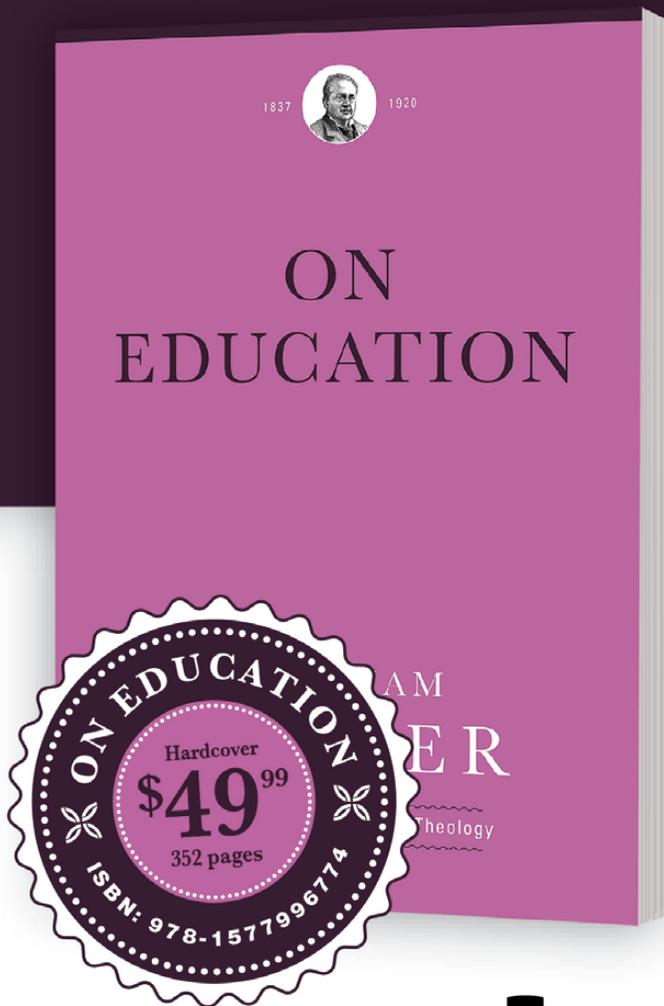
Others on the Right have accused major social media firms of censorship. To the extent that what is meant here is that the owners of these platforms suppress or delete content they deem objectionable, I would prefer to call this “censureship.” The notion that owners of these platforms are obligated to transmit and host whatever their users upload, over legal or moral objections, is untenable. The distinction between censorship and censureship might be a useful one to distinguish what the government does as an act of legal (and thus coercive) prohibition, and what private owners do to indicate moral, cultural, or political disagreement on their own property. Proposed “solutions” only add another layer of government-appointed censors to oversee the censures.

Journalists decry social media while being among technology’s most prolific users. Social media represent a threat to the mainstream media as they compete for advertisers and readers. The decentralized nature of social media offers a forum for giving and receiving news and information. This give-and-take – often messy, and increasingly offensive – results in a transparency and accountability so often absent in the entrenched and established media.

There is much in social media deserving of objection. Lies, distortions, vulgarity, and half-truths abound. Bullying, rudeness, and callousness proliferate when people hide or are hidden behind screens. But the solutions to these problems do not lie in breaking up these companies or regulating them. What value they have created would be lost in dividing already diverse and competitive platforms along arbitrary lines drawn by bureaucrats. What censureship exists would be compounded by the whims of ever-changing political committees. Efforts to shore up legacy media will come at the expense of the transparency and accountability which comes with the more inclusive process of sharing information, which has been revitalized by social media.

The solution to the problems generated by social media are not to be found in government intervention to reshape or control it, but by our own free choice to refuse to be shaped by it. This involves logging off from our virtual communities to be shaped by, serve, and live in our real communities. Some wise words were penned long ago: “Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is co-founder of the Acton Institute. 



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