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CAN AMERICANS LEARN TO TRUST AGAIN?

THE PERILS OF LIVING IN A LOW-TRUST SOCIETY

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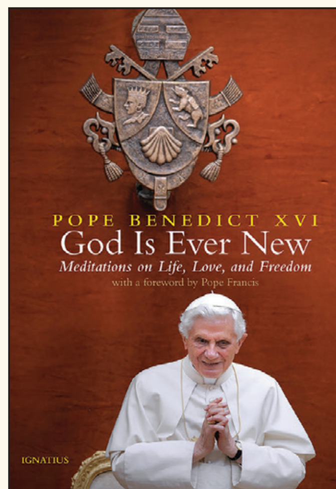

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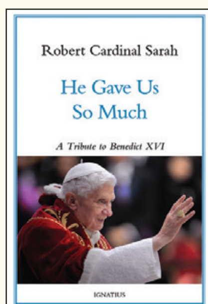

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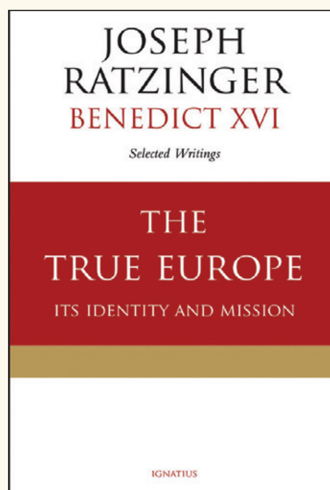

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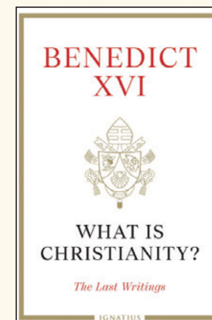

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THE ISSUE THIS TIME BY ANTHONY SACRAMONE

In the 1950s there was a game show called *Who Do You Trust?* hosted by Candice Bergen's dad, Edgar, and his three ventriloquist's dummies, Charlie McCarthy, Mortimer Snerd, and Effie Klinker. The point of the game was to see how much married couples knew about each other and the world around them, with hilarious (well, mildly humorous) results.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and exploring what we think we know about each other and the world around us is more an exercise in terror. Who(m) do you trust? "Put not your trust in princes," the Good Book says. So forget the White House. How about the *New York Times*? (I kid because I love.) Twitter-X? CBS News? Cable news? That sociology professor who was kinda funny about the UFOs and then was led out in handcuffs during graduation?

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 would appear to have unleashed something that was already lurking in the broader culture, just Saran-wrapped for your protection. For various reasons, holes were poked in the thin veneer of "civilization," and it suddenly became not only permissible but downright patriotic to question *everything*, to assume the worst about *everyone*, and to reject any and all authority that wasn't labeled "certified 100% just like you."

It's hard to trust when what once bound us is no longer intelligible. Do we have a common language? And by that, I don't mean English. I mean, do the words we use mean the same things when they reach the ears of our fellow citizens (and increasingly, noncitizens)? How about *truth*? Or is "our reverence for the truth" a "distraction that's getting in the way of finding common ground and getting things done," as the CEO of NPR has TED-talked. Getting what done? What "common ground" is there to build upon when even math and grammar are considered tools of oppression? What common ground is there when the First Amendment is seen as an impediment to fighting disinformation—to, presumably, discovering a "truth" beyond the feels?

And so on. Nothing can be taken for granted any longer, especially when even authorities formerly respected in this country—in higher education and medicine, say—are so thoroughly politicized that we're loath to take even "expert" advice in the direst of times. As Christine Rosen writes in this issue's cover story:

> Throughout the pandemic, much of the governing and cultural elite sanctimoniously scolded Americans who wanted their kids back in school and things back to normal, and actively censored those who raised questions about the origins of the virus or the claims made by public health officials. Those elites (and a mainstream media that unskeptically repeated their claims) were proved wrong about many of their dictates…and yet there has been no reckoning for their mistakes.

So how do we rebuild trust in our institutions and in each other? I'm put in mind of the title of the first chapter of Russell Kirk's *Enemies of the Permanent Things*: "The Recovery of Norms." As Rosen notes, this begins with a conservative privileging of the small, local, and familiar—with our next-door neighbors, wherever they came from originally and whatever their beliefs, and in whose faces we no longer see conspirators determined to destroy our way of life but everyday strugglers like us, with whom we can disagree peaceably. If that seems almost utopian today, well…we have to start somewhere. And Washington is almost certainly not that place.

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CAN AMERICANS LEARN TO TRUST AGAIN?

by CHRISTINE ROSEN

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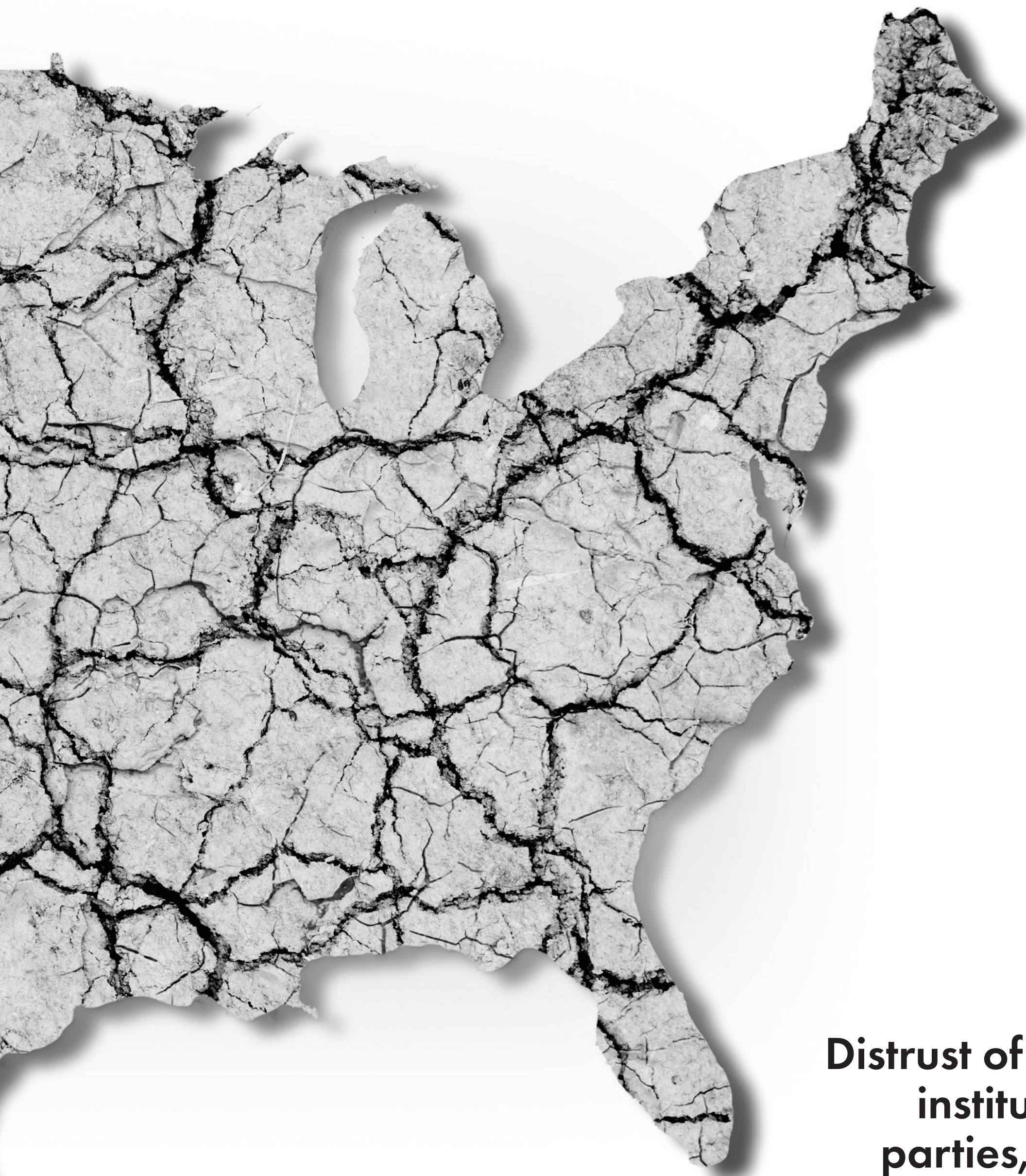

Distrust of elites, cultural institutions, political parties, and even our neighbors is at an all-time high. Are we fated to come apart as a nation? Or is there hope to be found right next door?

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be trustworthy? In the realm of personal relationships, most people would have little trouble answering this question. A trustworthy person is honest, steadfast, and true to his or her principles, someone on whom others know they can rely.

Individuals can be trustworthy or not, but experiments that test group honesty—*Are Americans more honest than Finns?* for example—also reveal national differences that in turn reflect whether societies might be considered high trust or low trust. In one 2013 experiment, researchers left wallets with money in them in public places in different countries, then assessed the rate of return. As *The Telegraph* reported, “The number of wallets returned with the money still in them varied from eleven out of twelve in Helsinki (Finland) to one out of twelve in Lisbon (Portugal).” (As it happened, the wallet in Portugal was turned in by tourists from the Netherlands, so the Portuguese rate of return was zero.) In the United States, 67% of the wallets were returned, placing us somewhat in the middle of the pack for group honesty.

In recent years, however, such concerns about group conscientiousness have given way to fears about a broader and more sustained decline of trust in the U.S. The decline is real: according to a 2023 Pew Research Center study:

> Public trust in the federal government, which has been low for decades, has returned to near record lows following a modest uptick in 2020 and 2021. Currently, fewer than two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (1%) or “most of the time” (15%). This is among the lowest trust measures in nearly seven decades of polling. Last year, 20% said they trusted the government just about always or most of the time.

This is reflected in other studies of Americans’ declining trust in our institutions and in each other. As Gerard Baker observed in his recent book,

American Breakdown: Why We No Longer Trust Our Leaders and Institutions and How We Can Rebuild that Confidence, the Gallup organization, which has measured trust for the past 50 years, found in its most recent survey that "across nine key institutions, the average proportion of Americans who said they had 'a great deal or quite a lot of confidence' in them was 26%. That was the lowest number ever recorded; in the 1970s, when Gallup started measuring the number, it was close to 50%."

As Baker noted, those institutions include the presidency, U.S. Supreme Court, media, law enforcement, and public schools, all of which Americans increasingly mistrust compared to earlier eras. He and others correctly point to the role that the leaders of these institutions played in the decline of trust, particularly elite disdain for the values and views of those who do not share their level of educational and socioeconomic success. Elite assessments of the decline of trust often point to things such as the spread of "misinformation" online or the rise of conspiratorial thinking and populism, for example, as the likely culprits responsible for the decline of trust.

But such a steep decline in trust in a relatively short span of time across multiple institutions suggests we might be viewing the issue through the wrong lens. This becomes clear when we listen to the concerns of ordinary Americans rather than the mandarins who populate our elite institutions: the story of declining trust in the United States is a story of betrayal.

AN INVERSION OF VALUES

For too many Americans today, the things that used to work in society and in their individual lives now feel unstable, broken, and unreliable.

Will that bridge collapse while I'm driving over it? Will people who break the law be arrested and punished? Will my local government perform the basic services my tax dollars are supposed to be spent on, such as keeping the streets safe and clean, and schools effectively educating children? Or are local officials instead committed to progressive projects to reimagine criminal justice, education, and housing that are alien to the views of my family and harmful to our sense of well-being? Do our institutions treat us as citizens, or are we more likely to be dealt with like overly demanding customers? Can I expect the leaders of our institutions to play by the same rules I follow? What happens when they don't? Why do an increasing number of elected officials treat me as just another of their millions of Instagram followers rather than as a concerned and informed local constituent?

Low-trust societies historically have been plagued by fraud, deception, and corruption; in the U.S., such problems thankfully have been uncommon compared to other nations. But that has not rendered us immune to other long-standing challenges to trust. As sociologists such as Robert Putnam and Robert Nisbet outlined in the 20th century, the decline of community in the U.S. over many decades has had far-ranging consequences for Americans' sense of trust in each other and in our government.

In more recent years, educational institutions, particularly college campuses, have birthed several generations of Americans whose views on core principles such as free speech are unrecognizable to older Americans. Indulged in the solipsistic belief that "lived experience" and "my truth" are reliable guideposts for decision-making, younger Americans view speech as violence and actual violence as speech. In addition, they have been steeped in an ideologically motivated rewriting of our country's past and its purpose; the 1619 Project, for example, was not only a factually inaccurate effort to recast the nation's founding as a terrible moral sin, but also a way to destabilize any remaining consensus about our Founders and our nation's shared principles.

Upon graduation, these same students sort themselves geographically and politically, and enter elite political and cultural institutions that purport to reflect the views of all Americans while increasingly reflecting only those of their fellow wealthy, well-educated elites. This has led to a more culturally, geographically, and politically polarized population—and a growing chasm when it comes to trust.

THINGS THAT USED TO WORK IN SOCIETY AND IN INDIVIDUAL LIVES NOW FEEL UNSTABLE, BROKEN, AND UNRELIABLE.

And of course, new technologies—such as the internet, the smartphone, and social media platforms—have altered the quality and quantity of our interactions with each other, and not always for the better. Technologists have designed platforms that reward and monetize our attention, and they know that fear and anger are more powerfully motivating forces than thoughtful deliberation and compromise. An information ecosystem built on ideological and identity-based silos, on which an increasing number of Americans of all ages spend large quantities of their time expressing their outrage about the latest, well, outrage, contributes to a feeling of fractious alienation from others with whom we disagree.

The COVID-19 pandemic cast many of these trends into high relief.

Writing in the *New York Times* about the many New Yorkers whom he had interviewed about their pandemic experiences, sociologist Eric Klinenberg noted, "The very different people I spoke with that year all had one thing in common: a feeling that in the wake of Covid, all the larger institutions they had been taught to trust had failed them. At the most precarious times in their lives, they found there was no system in place to help."

In addition to the understandable fear and disorientation caused by the pandemic, Americans were told many "noble lies" by public health officials; they experienced a great divergence between people who could comfortably sit at home and do their jobs (usually the wealthier and better educated) and people who were still required to report to work in person—the much-praised "essential workers" in medicine, for example, and the less-feted but no less crucial service workers who earned much less—if they even had jobs to go to, that is.

> **"ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES UNDERSTAND THEY MUST EARN THE PUBLIC'S TRUST ANEW."**

Throughout the pandemic, much of the governing and cultural elite sanctimoniously scolded Americans who wanted their kids back in school and things back

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci addresses the White House press corps on COVID-19 in April 2020

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Photo: Richard B. Levine / Alamy Stock Photo

The ViacomCBS headquarters in Times Square, New York, 2021

to normal, and actively censored those who raised questions about the origins of the virus or the claims made by public health officials. Those elites (and a mainstream media that unskeptically repeated their claims) were proved wrong about many of their dictates, such as closing schools, requiring excessive masking, and preventing religious and other civic institutions from holding services and meetings in person—and yet there has been no reckoning for their mistakes.

The political arena in which we might most effectively have that reckoning has also suffered from the current trust deficit. All politics is local, as the saying goes; today, however, too much of politics has become simultaneously national and personal, and when we treat political disagreements as both matters of national importance and personal betrayals, trust is further eroded. Today every political issue immediately becomes both tribal identifier and moral compass for many people, fueled in part by an information environment algorithmically designed to reward fear, anger, and partisanship. Trust requires time to build; contemporary culture rewards virality, not patience, and a politics that plays out on TikTok yields plenty in the way of propaganda but little in the way of persuasion. No wonder, as Pew Research found that "some 58% of adults are not confident that others can hold civil conversations with people who have different views, and 57% are not confident others will cast informed votes in elections."

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN HOPE

The current trust deficit is not without silver linings, however.

If the leaders of our institutions and our elected representatives understand that they must earn the public's trust anew, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Reckonings at the ballot box are the best way for Americans to send a message to their country's leaders, both at the local and national level, regardless of their partisan leanings, and in places where social breakdown reached extreme levels (such as in some high-crime blue cities), officials have faced recall votes and primary challengers who are outspoken in running against the breakdown and disorder that eroded the public's trust.

But citizens have a role to play here, too: we should make every effort to depoliticize more of our everyday lives. That is, we must understand that in the public sphere, and in the rough and tumble of politics, compromise is necessary, and hypocrisy ever

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present, but that ultimately the goal is to find ways to get along, even when we do disagree. In your personal life, you might choose not to spend time with people who disagree with your views on the Second Amendment or abortion, and that is your prerogative. In a pluralistic society, however, you must peacefully coexist with those who disagree with you, even if that means that your "God Bless America" banner competes every day with your neighbor's "In this house we believe…" lawn sign.

The media is also under pressure to reconsider its role in trust-building and trust-busting. A recent Gallup poll found that the "nearly four in 10 Americans who completely lack confidence in the media is the highest on record by one percentage point. It is 12 points higher than the 2016 reading." Skepticism about the mainstream media, given its behavior in recent decades, is entirely warranted, but the answer to media misdeeds is not a full-scale retreat into ideological silos. Nor should a healthy mistrust of bias in mainstream media prompt people to run headlong into the embrace of conspiratorial sensationalists. Just because CBS News is wrong about something doesn't mean Tucker Carlson and InfoWars are always right.

Independent, fact-driven, scrappy start-ups have emerged on platforms like Substack and in podcasts to engage audiences grown weary of cynical partisan posturing on both sides; these promising shoots might one day grow high enough to replace or at least seriously challenge the old media.

Americans also need to rededicate themselves to their local communities and the people in them. We teach young children "stranger danger" to protect them from adults who might have bad intentions; but when an entire nation lives in "stranger danger" mode with their fellow citizens, healthy awareness and skepticism transforms into unhealthy paranoia and fear.

In previous eras, more Americans were active in community organizations that put them into contact with a range of their fellow citizens, and often forced them to reach agreement to solve problems. Those opportunities for in-person, collective community action have steadily disappeared in America. As Bloomberg News reported, the most recent data on community service collected by AmeriCorps and the Census Bureau found that "less than a quarter of Americans age 16 and older said they formally volunteered through an organization between September 2020 to September 2021, down from 30% in 2019 and the lowest rate recorded since the organization began the survey in 2002. The decline is prevalent across various states and demographic groups, according to the data." Some of this decline was no doubt due to the pandemic, but the trend away from community service has been moving in the wrong direction for some time.

Like civic engagement, religious identification and attendance at religious services by Americans have declined substantially. A recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that more than 25% of Americans now identify as "atheists, agnostics, or religiously unaffiliated," which is the highest number the poll has ever recorded.

As Derek Thompson noted in *The Atlantic*, "No faith's evangelism has been as successful in this century as religious skepticism." Of course, increasing secularization does not necessarily lead to decreasing levels of trust in one's fellow citizens, but thus far secular substitutes for communities of faith have come up wanting in measures of civic engagement. Thompson cited Pew Research Center findings that secular Americans are "less likely to volunteer, less likely to feel satisfied with their community and social life, and more likely to say they feel lonely."

It's a nonvirtuous circle. It's much easier today to signal one's political and cultural affiliations in a 10-second Instagram reel—and far more rewarding in terms of attention-seeking—than it is to show up every week to volunteer at your church's soup kitchen. A generation raised to believe the former is more important than the latter, and that spends the bulk of its time online versus in the real world, faces significant challenges in understanding how one of these activities is a more worthwhile expression of civic engagement than the other. The impact of the internet and social media on our understanding of our fellow Americans is akin to the image a fun-house mirror offers us: a thoroughly distorted picture that exaggerates some features (anger, polarization) while downplaying others (shared values).

> "TOP-DOWN FEDERAL SOLUTIONS ARE OFTEN THE METHOD OF FIRST RESORT WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE BECAUSE WE HAVE ALLOWED LOCAL INSTITUTIONS TO WITHER."

Despite the rather bleak picture painted of our collective mistrust, Americans want to fix this problem. Pew Research found that 58% of Americans believe it is important to improve confidence in our fellow Americans, and 68% expressed a desire to "repair the public's level of confidence" in government.

Conservatives would argue that one way to restore confidence in the federal government would be for Americans to remember the hard-earned lessons of previous eras of big government, and the many unintended consequences of well-intentioned, top-down policies (or, as a shorthand, President Ronald Reagan's quip, "The nine most terrifying worlds in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help").

Today top-down federal solutions are often the method of first resort when problems arise precisely because we have allowed local institutions to wither. Americans know this. When asked by Pew for solutions to our trust problem, respondents to the survey offered the kind of commonsense wisdom all too rarely found in our cultural and political institutions: "Neighborhoods are a key place where interpersonal trust can be rebuilt if people work together on local projects, in turn radiating trust out to other sectors of the culture."

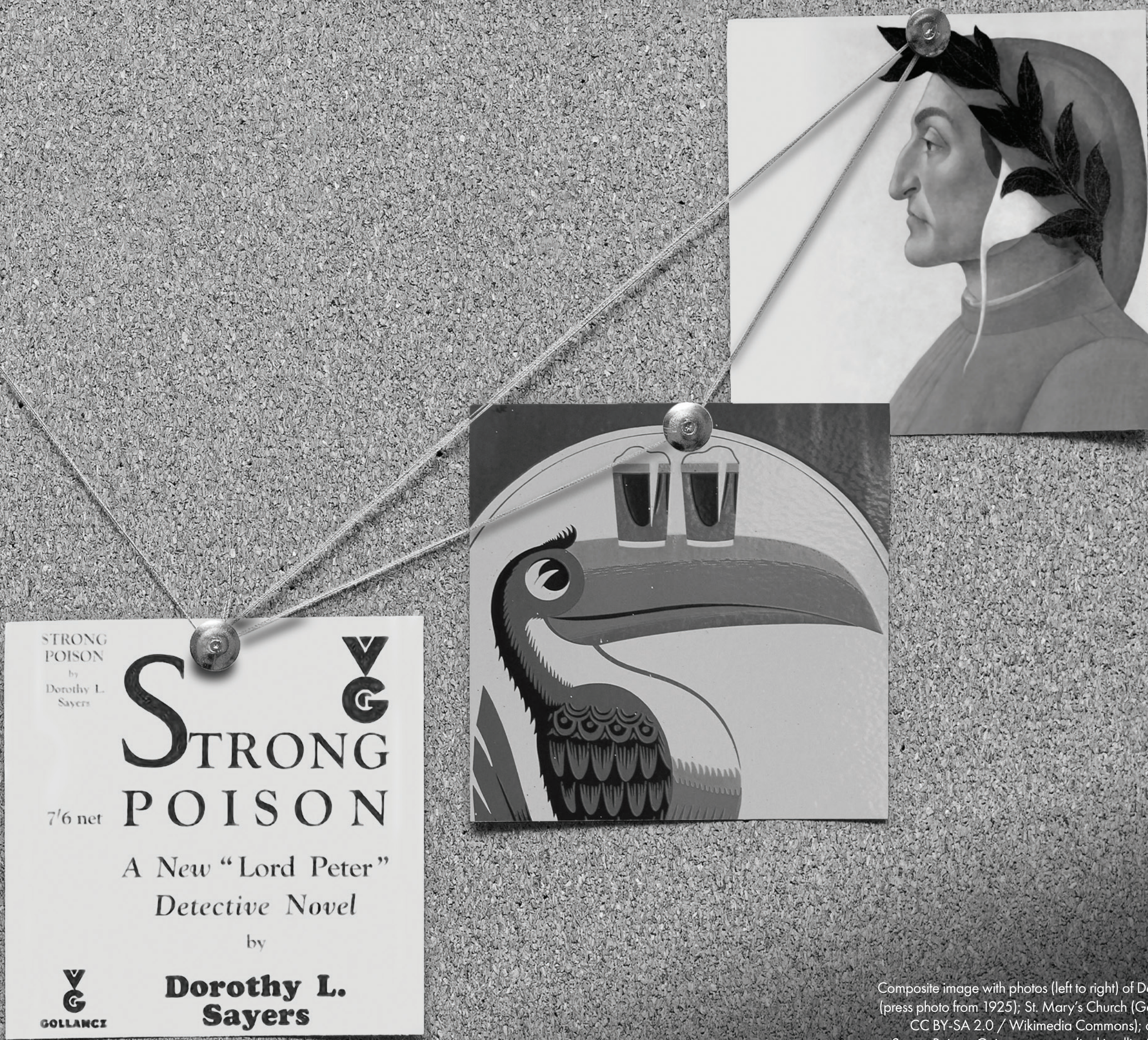
Politics might no longer be local, and our interactions are now more likely to occur online than in the flesh, but if we're going to rebuild trust in one another, we must begin close to home, and face-to-face. Only then can we banish the anger, partisanship, loneliness, and anomie that too often dominate our politics. As Hannah Arendt reminded us in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it isn't tyrants and armies that most threaten free societies. "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century." By building healthier communities, we dispel loneliness, diminish partisanship, and, hopefully, prepare the ground for a revival of trust. RL

Christine Rosen *is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Her book,* The Extinction of Experience: Being Human in a Disembodied World, *will be published by W.W. Norton in September.*

DOROTHY SAYERS: A SELF ENTIRE

by J. C. SCHARL

Is there a discernible unity in the life and work of a writer and thinker as complicated as Dorothy Sayers? Let's just say, to find it requires some detective work.



Composite image with photos (left to right) of Dorothy Sayers (press photo from 1925); St. Mary's Church (Gordon Brown, CC BY-SA 2.0 / Wikimedia Commons); cover art from *Strong Poison*; Guinness toucan (jackie ellis / Alamy Stock Photo); Dante Alighieri portrait (Sandro Botticelli, 1495). Bulletin board photo by Andrey Mitrofanov/ iStock.

Uncredited publicity photo connected to Sayers' 1925 release of *Whose Body?*

NO DOUBT IT IS inconvenient for the writer, but one of the best things that can happen for readers is when a great writer—a truly great writer—is required by circumstances to work in popular genres. These "marketable" books or stories, composed to put food on the table for a genius, often become little doorways for vast numbers of readers into a great mind's private world, one they otherwise would not have entered. Think of Chesterton's "Father Brown" series: compelled to write these stories or risk starvation, Chesterton imbued these widely read tales with his own grand ideas about the nature and existence of God, the reality of sin, and the romance of salvation. From here it is a natural next step for a reader to pick up Orthodoxy or *The Everlasting Man* and embark on a fantastic theological journey that will last a lifetime.

This is certainly the case with the British Anglican Dorothy Sayers. I began by reading her murder mysteries, of which there are far too few, starring the inimitable Lord Peter Wimsey. After reading and rereading all the Wimsey novels I could find, I wanted to read more of her work. I was drawn to *her*, to the person of Sayers dodging and darting behind the words. I wanted to know more about Dorothy Sayers, and the best way to do that, obviously, is through her other writing.

All good writers are "present" in their work—that is what it means for a writer to have a "voice"—but not all writers are as psychologically whole as Sayers. She is fully present behind the romance between Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, the detective story-writer who captures his heart, but also behind the

brutal King Herod of *The Man Born to Be King* and the wry title of her essay collection *Are Women Human?* She's there peering out between the lines of her lovely and readable translation of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*; she died mid-translation of the *Paradiso*, but doubtless in the heavenly lines she did not finish, she is there, drawing step by step nearer the heart of the God she loved.

I am not an instinctive reader of nonfiction; in fact, I will generally only read nonfiction that I discover through fiction or poetry. I read Chesterton's writings on economics only after I'd fallen in love with Innocent Smith; I picked up Gene Wolfe's *The Castle of the Otter*, chock-full of staggering theological insights, only after journeying through time and space (and back again) with his sci-fi hero Severian in *The Book of the New Sun*. George MacDonald's fairy tales led me to his sermons and religious poetry. I'm currently reading Lucien Lebvre's daunting *The Problem of Belief in the Sixteenth Century* in an effort to understand whether Rabelais' giants are orthodox Christians or a cunning atheist psy-op. Fiction, for me and for many other readers, is a hook that snatches us up into the wider world of a writer's vision.

1 Brewer Street, Oxford, where Dorothy Sayers was born

Photo: Owen Massey McKnight, CC BY-SA 2.0 / Wikimedia Commons

With Sayers, that world is one of myriad wonders. She was one of the first female graduates from Oxford University; her erudition marked her out as a leading thinker in England in the mid-20th century. But behind her accomplished literary work and her bold personality, Sayers concealed a fraught personal life in which she wrestled with theological and philosophical questions with individual urgency. From this crucible, Sayers draws her delightful fiction, her imaginative theological dramas, her thought-provoking essays, and her luminous translations. Her various writings reveal a soul working away at very hard questions through many outlets at once, with a goal of nothing less than knowledge of God.

The danger, of course, for a writer who must work in popular genres to survive is that her other work, her more important work, will go unread. For many readers, surely, Dorothy Sayers exists only as a star among the constellation of Golden Age mystery writers, her Wimsey the pinnacle of her accomplishments. But for readers willing to delve beyond the detective novels into the deeper mystery of Sayers' mind and soul, there are abundant treasures waiting.

SECRETS OF THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Sayers' biography is a mystery worthy of a sleuth as perceptive as her own Peter Wimsey, with some of the most revealing episodes coming to light only after her death. She was born in Oxford in 1893, with her father serving as chaplain of Christ Church and headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School. The family moved soon after, and Sayers spent her childhood reading books in the isolation of her father's country parish, forming only one significant childhood friendship: her cousin, Ivy Shrimpton, who would play a vital role in Sayers' life in years to come. Despite the quietness of her upbringing, Sayers was exposed to a vast world beyond her little parish; her father began teaching her Latin when she was seven, and her aptitude for intellectual pursuits quickly made it clear that a retired country life was not her destiny.

Sayers attended Somerville College at Oxford and in 1915 earned the equivalent of a First in her course in Modern French (which, in the parlance of the university, means Medieval French). At the time, however, the university did not award degrees to women. When Oxford changed its rules five years later, Sayers became one of the first women in the university's thousand-year existence to receive a degree.

> **SAYERS RECOGNIZED THAT HER DEVELOPING LITERARY VOICE NEEDED A DEEPLY INTIMATE OTHER.**

Upon graduation, Sayers tried her hand at several careers, from editing to advertising. While she had flashes of brilliance in each (she famously developed the Guinness Toucan, who continues to grace Guinness beer advertisements to this day), S.H. Benson, the head of his eponymous ad agency, said it would hardly be fair for her to continue in marketing. "It would be like harnessing a racehorse to a plough," he said, indicating that Sayers' dazzling intellect was evident even after she left Oxford.

In her years at Oxford and just out of school, Sayers began wrestling with the questions that would define her work for the rest of her long career: questions of the relation between men and women, how we can perceive God in modern society, and how art—and the process of making art—is a theological discovery as well as an aesthetic one. For example, early in her young adulthood, Sayers connected her ideal of romantic love with her future work as a writer; she recognized that her developing literary voice needed a deeply intimate Other—another self as it were—to spur its growth. This recognition, which in early adulthood drove her into (sometimes catastrophic) love affairs, matured into the profound insights of her book *The Mind of the Maker*, which we will explore in depth later.

Sayers' search for love reached a fever pitch in 1921, when she met John Cournos, a fellow writer with whom she fell deeply in love. Though their relationship lasted for over a year, it was never consummated, because Cournos, a Russian Jewish émigré, refused to consider having children and Sayers refused to use contraception because of her religious convictions. As future relationships revealed, Sayers' views on sexual morality (at this point and at others) were neither entirely consistent nor entirely orthodox; her steadfast rejection of contraception did not necessarily entail a rejection of sexual intimacy outside marriage, and her negative view of contraception seems to have softened throughout her life. But her conviction was enough to scupper the relationship with Cournos, and the two eventually split.

Sayers' heart was shattered when Cournos went on to marry an American widow with several children,

Somerville College

Photo: Philip Allfrey, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Guinness ad outside a pub at Kinsale in Ireland

Photo: jackie ellis / Alamy Stock Photo

Ian Carmichael as Lord Peter Wimsey in the 1972 BBC television mini-series adaptation of Sayers' *Clouds of Witness*

indicating that his objection to children was not universal. She later relied heavily on this autobiographical episode in the book *Strong Poison*, which introduces Peter Wimsey's love interest, Harriet Vane, accused of murdering her former lover, Phillip Boyes.

From here, things did not improve for Sayers. While recovering from the devastating separation from Cournos, Sayers met a charming motorcyclist named Bill White. Sayers threw herself heart, soul, and body into the affair, and soon found that she was pregnant—and that White was married. In a characteristically bold move, Sayers sought out White's wife, who took the news remarkably well, it seems; far from condemning the unmarried young mother, White's wife helped Sayers prepare to deliver the baby in the country, away from prying eyes.

It seems that for most of the pregnancy, Sayers was simply holding on; she adapted her own clothes to cover her changing body and applied for leave from the advertising firm she worked at to finish a book during the months when her child would be born. Until shortly before the birth, she apparently had no plan for what to do with the child; finally, just days before delivery, she reached out to her cousin and childhood friend, Ivy, asking her to consider raising the child. Cousin Ivy, with typical generosity, agreed, and young John Anthony went to live with her soon after he was born.

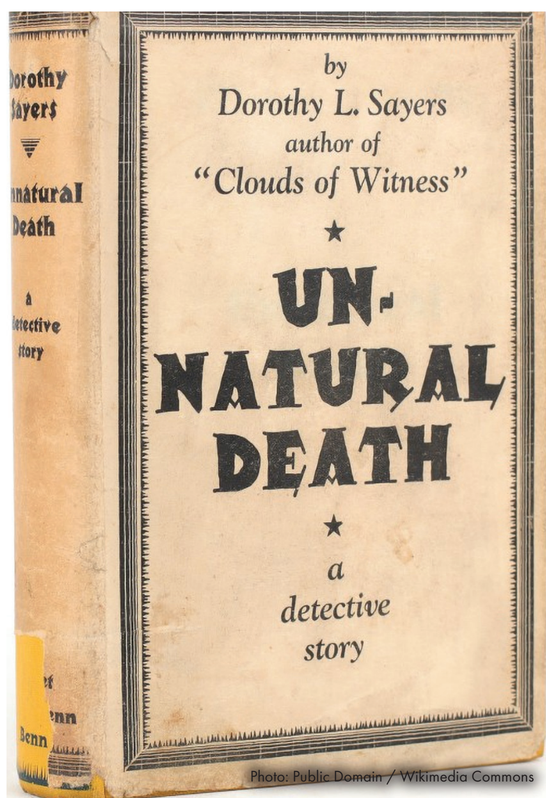
In an intriguing twist, Sayers kept the secret of John Anthony's parentage for her entire life; even John Anthony did not know that Sayers was his mother until after she had died. This surprising reticence from a woman known for her boldness, humor, wittiness, and openness hints at another side of the gregarious writer: despite her warm temperament and her tendency to write (in letters and in novels) clearly about her own emotional state, it seems that Sayers' interior life was also characterized by profound, possibly tumultuous feelings that she kept entirely private.

From here, Sayers' life followed a more conventional path. She met and married the divorced Mac Fleming in 1926. The new couple discussed bringing young John Anthony to live with them, but though he took the last name "Fleming," the planned relocation never took place. John Anthony spent the rest of his life as the son of Ivy Shrimpton, while Mac's declining health turned the once-happy marriage into a trial for Sayers, though she cared faithfully for Mac until his death in 1950.

As with the great writers Sayers loved—most notably Dante Alighieri—familiarity with Sayers' biography is not entirely necessary to appreciate her work. But knowing some of the details of her life illuminates not only the internal lives of her heroine, Harriet Vane, but also the urgency behind nonfiction works like *Are Women Human?* and *The Mind of the Maker*. Her own history of emotional turmoil shines through in her ability to render the characters of the Gospels as full-blooded, psychologically robust individuals in the plays that make up *The Man Born to Be King*. To wit, Sayers would not have become the writer she did without experiencing her particular life of heartbreak—and, even more, without experiencing it precisely the way she did: in silence and secrecy, bearing her deepest sorrows entirely on her own without letting them destroy her spirit.

SUBLIMATION IS STRONG MEDICINE

Sayers' most overtly biographical writing is *Strong Poison*, in which the heroine (and future love interest of Lord Peter Wimsey) Harriet Vane is accused of murdering her former lover, one Phillip Boyes. While Sayers herself never stood in the dock, Harriet's relationship with Boyes is nearly identical to Sayers' with Cournos: Boyes refuses to consider marriage or



First edition of Sayers’ 1927 novel, *Unnatural Death*

children, claiming philosophical convictions against it; he insists that Harriet must consent to live with him without marriage despite her own misgivings; and after the relationship disintegrates, he takes up with another woman and agrees to marry her, proving that the “convictions” that kept him from marrying Harriet were a sham.

While Harriet does become sexually intimate with Boyes and Sayers never consummated her relationship with Cournos, the parallels between the two stories are clear. Sayers had an ongoing fascination with the way human beings make false “bargains” with each other. Throughout her work, she depicts situation after situation of people who make a small moral compromise—like Boyes’ feigning a conviction he does not really have—that has catastrophic consequences for them and the people around them. In *Unnatural Death* (which has perhaps the most creative murder method I’ve ever encountered), an old woman’s inability to courageously face the reality of her own impending death leads to disaster. In *The Five Red Herrings*, an artist’s penchant for quarreling drags an entire community into chaos.

This interest in the wide-ranging effects of minor moral missteps enlivens more than just Sayers’ murder mysteries. In the 12 plays that make up *The Man Born to Be King*, Sayers explores the Gospel stories with an eye to the human characters in them. Her depictions of the apostles are robust and believable; even her Christ is psychologically well-rounded while obviously being divine.

Strong Poison is the first of four novels chronicling the romance between Harriet and Peter. In the third, *Gaudy Night*, Sayers delves into another intriguingly biographical plot point: the role of women in top-tier higher education during the first half of the 20th century. In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet returns to Oxford and her alma mater, the fictional Shrewsbury College, to help her former professors solve an increasingly distressing mystery involving blackmail, lewd notes, and psychological torture. The subsequent months thrust Harriet into a web of deception and spiritual ugliness, and forces her to confront her own deep-seated frustrations with her identity as a woman. Only once she has confronted and overcome these can she welcome the love of Lord Peter.

Harriet’s struggles to understand herself as a woman in the male-centric world of academia lay near Sayers’ own heart, and she returned to the difficulty again and again in her writings. In one slim volume of two essays, provocatively titled *Are Women Human?*, Sayers tackles the issue of equality between the sexes with Chestertonian aplomb, excoriating both the silliness of progressive feminism and the blindness of Victorian attitudes toward women. In writing about women, Sayers uncovers gems of wisdom about all humanity, as expressed in this quotation: “What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person.” This is simultaneously the same distinction that so vexes Harriet in *Gaudy Night*, as she dreads being thought of “as a woman” and not as an individual, as herself; and the distinction that currently threatens the very existence of Western society.

Reducing “womanhood” to a “class” or an “identity,” rather than a natural characteristic of real individuals, has led us today to an almost complete hollowing out of the whole concept. Being part of a “class” always carries with it political implications. “Womanhood” is not a class. It is, as Sayers recognizes, a biological reality that carries with it certain social, emotional, and psychological distinctions; for example, because of the biological reality of being able to bear children, women as a group tend to be more

patient with crying children than men are. Because of the biological reality of having lighter bones, women tend to be less qualified (and interested in) manual labor and combat jobs. These are examples Sayers specifically brings up. We can make some general claims about women as a group, but not nearly as many as the Victorians—or feminists—would like. Whereas the Victorians Sayers is writing against tended to view all women as unintellectual, trivial little creatures, much of the feminist movement swung to the opposite extreme, asserting that *all* women are as good or better than men at *all* things. Sayers, by emphasizing the reality that women, just like men, are individuals, threads the needle between these two claims. Bringing her keen intellect and perception to bear upon her own soul and wrestling with her personal struggles (at least to a degree) through believable fiction like *Gaudy Night*, Sayers managed to hit upon a coherent response to some of our era's most urgent questions.

We see this pattern throughout Sayers' writings: whenever her work draws nearest the hidden depths of her own heart, it manages to blossom into the most universal truths. This is a remarkable characteristic in an artist. Far too often, artists and

> **"WHENEVER SAYERS' WORK DRAWS NEAREST THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF HER OWN HEART, IT BLOSSOMS INTO THE MOST UNIVERSAL TRUTHS."**

intellectuals are most precise on topics that lie far away from their own tender points; when they draw near to sensitive subjects, they become sloppy, sentimental, sometimes even silly. In Sayers, we find the opposite: emotional proximity to a subject seems to push her into even closer scrutiny and clearer thinking, giving her work—fiction and nonfiction

Ideal Victorian family depicted in a 19th-century illustration

Credit: Rockingstock / iStock. Illustrator unknown.

Workers of Magnitogorsk, Russia (USSR), during Stalin's Five-Year Plan, 1931

alike—an inimitable ethos. What she writes of, she clearly knows. Sublimation, for Sayers, is a purifying process. Rather than dragging the universe down to her own experience, she has the moral courage, clarity, and humility to learn from her own experiences and understand the universe better as a result.

A REASONABLE REVOLUTIONARY

Sayers lived at a peculiar moment in history. During her lifetime, two world wars demolished the existing order in politics and society alike. New political movements, like communism and feminism, emerged with rosy promises of perfect equality and collapsed into oppression (see Stalin's genocidal Five-Year Plan or rising calls for a "right" to abortion access for "sexually liberated" women). Throughout this tumultuous time, Sayers managed to remain sensible without becoming reactionary; she recognized the importance of some of the changes that were coming but urged caution. As she writes in *Are Women Human?*, "It is the mark of all movements, however well-intentioned, that their pioneers tend, by much lashing of themselves into excitement, to lose sight of the obvious." That "obvious," all too often, was the basic humanity of all humans.

Are Women Human? exhibits a remarkable prescience in light of our current bedlam of identity politics; Sayers recognizes that the feminist movement, despite its good points (which she—and we—will acknowledge later), promotes a basic misunderstanding about women, one that advocates of identity politics will apply to all individuals. Feminists insist that women are, first and foremost, women; their individuality, their personalities, and their interests are all contingent upon their woman-ness. This means that women are, above all, members of a class: the class of women. They can be understood only as members of a group.

This is the first seed of identity politics, or the idea that an individual is not *really* an individual, but is rather a conglomerate of various "identities." By "identities," contemporary politicians and academics usually mean loyalties to various political causes. If a person is a woman, she is expected to be loyal to the "cause of womanhood"—defined, of course, by a progressivism that calls for unlimited abortion and special opportunities for women to compensate for centuries of perceived oppression. If a person is black, or indigenous, or a minority in a primarily white society, he or she is expected to be unflinchingly loyal to the "cause of BIPOC," which is defined

as insisting on the unmitigated evils of colonization, Christianity, Western civilization, stable nuclear families, and other things associated with Europe.

Sayers has this to say about identity politics (defined, in her day, merely as feminism):

> In reaction against the age-old slogan, "woman is the weaker vessel," or the still more offensive, "woman is a divine creature," we have, I think, allowed ourselves to drift into asserting that "a woman is as good as a man," without always pausing to think what exactly we mean by that. What, I feel, we ought to mean is something so obvious that it is apt to escape attention altogether, viz: not that every woman is, in virtue of her sex, as strong, clever, artistic, level-headed, industrious and so forth as any man that can be mentioned; but that a woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual. *What is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person.* (emphasis added)

Women, Sayers believes, are human first and foremost. This means that women, just like men, are capable of a range of sin and saintliness; they have a variety of skills and strengths. There are possible generalizations, she believes: "there is no harm in saying that women, as a class, have smaller bones than men,…have more hair on their heads and less on their faces,…or have more patience with small and noisy babies." These generalizations can be true without forcing us into assumptions about an individual woman in comparison to an individual man.

"What is unreasonable and irritating," Sayers says, "is to assume that *all* one's tastes and preferences have to be conditioned by the class to which one belongs." This, she assures us, is the error into which men often fall about women, but it is an error feminists tend to fall into as well. When we begin thinking about people as entirely products of their class, we find ourselves mired in identity politics and tribalism. Sayers warns us that this tribalism (she does not use the word but is clearly aware of the tendency) harms members of the class under discussion as much as members of other classes.

Women who deviate from the general pattern of the group are considered traitors, freaks, or possibly even not fully women. We see this unfolding today, as progressive commentators either denounce pro-life women as anti-woman or assume that women cannot *really* hold pro-life views and must be getting these views from men. Altogether missing is Sayers' idea that women are *human*.

Sayers was not blind to the political repercussions of treating people as members of a class rather than as individuals. "We are much too much inclined these days to divide people into permanent categories, forgetting that a category only exists for its special

> **"SAYERS WAS NOT BLIND TO THE POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF TREATING PEOPLE AS MEMBERS OF A CLASS RATHER THAN AS INDIVIDUALS."**

Activist Margaret Sanger has her mouth covered as part of a feminist protest in Boston in 1929

Photo: Bettmann / Getty Images

Portrait of Dorothy Sayers by British photographer Howard Coster (1938)

purpose and must be forgotten as soon as that purpose is served," she writes. The consequences of this inclination can be severe:

> To oppose one class perpetually to another—young against old, manual labor against brain-worker, rich against poor, woman against man—is to split the foundations of the State; and if the cleavage runs too deep, there remains no remedy but force and dictatorship.

This is wisdom, but hard-won. Sayers cultivated this nuanced perspective through the agony of remaining fully human in a world that pressured her to choose a class. Academic or popular writer, wife or writer, conservative or progressive, Sayers refused the limitations of them all. She cared for Mac until the end of his life, even as ill health made him difficult and irritable; but she refused to set aside her art. She wrote Peter Wimsey murder mysteries until she died, while also giving classic texts like *The Song of Roland* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* fresh, readable, yet scholarly and sound translations. She remained steadfast in her orthodox convictions about the nature of Christ, but recognized that women entering the workforce was not, all in all, a bad thing. Stranded between many classes, Sayers rejected easy dichotomies between them. Instead, in a supremely human way, she folded some characteristics of these categories into her own personality and rejected others.

MINDING THE MAKER

In 1941, Sayers published *The Mind of the Maker*. This book could be described as a theological treatment of what it means to create, or as an aesthetic exploration of the theology of creation *ex nihilo*; it works both ways.

I've never read anything quite like *The Mind of the Maker*. The central conviction is that "everyone is

a 'maker' in the simplest meaning of the word"; to make is part of the image of God. "This is so intimate and so universal a function of nature that we scarcely ever think about it," Sayers writes.

She crafts an intricate metaphor in which an artist's act of making helps us understand the Trinity, and, reciprocally, meditating on the Trinity can clarify and improve our own acts of creation. All things begin with an Idea, as when an artist says, "I have an idea for a painting" or a poet has an idea for a poem. This is not the substance of the painting or the poem; rather, the Idea "precede[s] any mental or physical work upon the materials or on the course of the story." This, Sayers says, is an image that allows us to get a slightly better understanding of God the Father—especially since even the Idea of a piece of art is completely inaccessible to us separate from its Energy. Sayers describes Energy as the "Activity or 'Word'…that creates the time-process." The Energy is, in fact, analogous to Christ. Just as the Idea of a piece of art does not precede the Energy, the form and process that will give the art material shape, so the Father does not precede the Son ("the Word was with God in the beginning").

This analogy may seem difficult, but simply think back to the last time you really created something: a drawing, a poem, a meal, a piece of furniture, a garden bed. There was a flash of Idea—an urge, an impulse, a recognition of Something that needed to be expressed. And, exactly in unity with the Idea, there began an activity of expression: the meal would be warm and dripping with gravy! The garden bed would be full of color! The poem would be slightly sad, evocative of times past! The Idea cannot communicate itself to us separate from an Energy, a form.

Then, of course, there is the third part of this curious trinity of making: the Creative Power. This is not merely the actual process of bringing the Idea into material shape; it is also the strength and joy the artist receives back from his making. Every artist knows this feeling of looking at something that he himself has made and deriving genuine pleasure from it—pleasure that is not attached to its being *his* but to its *being* at all.

The insights in *The Mind of the Maker* are transformative both of the way we can understand the Trinity (for, as Sayers and St. Augustine both say, we *can* understand the Trinity through analogy) and the way we understand making. Thinking about a piece of art as a triunity allows us to identify weaknesses in its wholeness; a film, for example, might strike us as less than perfect, but not until we evaluate its triune structure do we notice that the problem is with an underdeveloped Idea. The Energy, we might find, does not match the Idea, that ineffable thing that buoys up an artwork's claim to exist. Or perhaps a poem seems to have a sound Idea behind it, but it is didactic, unimaginative, unappealing in its treatment of the Idea. That is a failure of Energy that leads to a dissipation of Creative Power, so the poem fails in its potential unity.

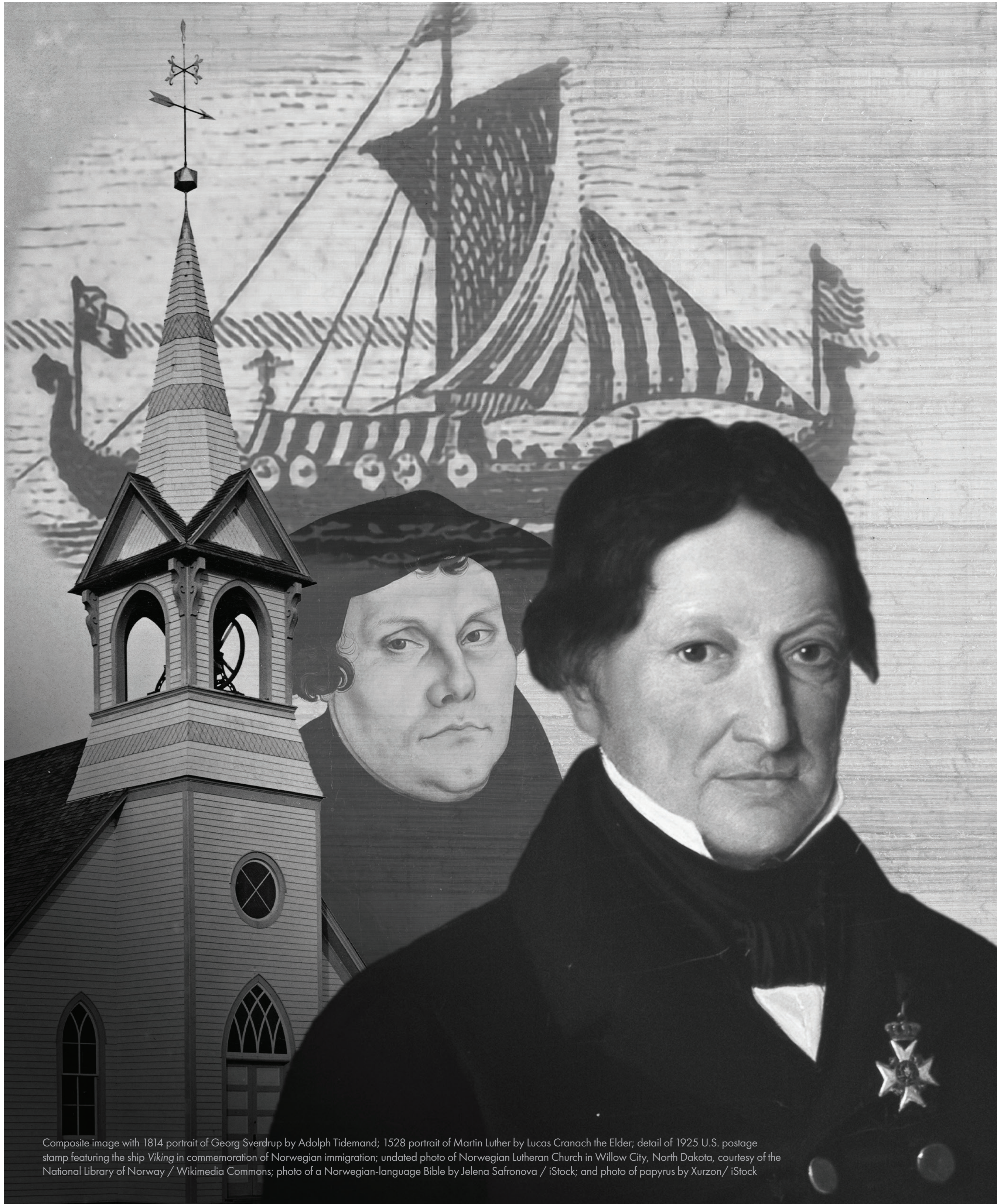
Sayers writes passionately about these tricky topics, pulling examples from her own experiences with writing to illustrate what she means. It becomes clear that she has come to these ideas not out of idle curiosity or abstract speculation but through direct experience carefully observed and analyzed. This ability of Sayers the maker to step back and observe herself making, then to be able to create an analogy to the nature of God himself, is truly a gift.

MORE THAN A MYSTERY

Dorothy Sayers is known mostly as an author of artful mystery stories (something she often doubted the possibility of creating; *Gaudy Night* is, in one way, entirely about the question of whether genre fiction can be literary). But her contribution to 20th-century letters goes far beyond her popular fiction. She was a brilliant, secretive, bold, assertive, reticent, inquisitive soul who, it seems, never had an experience that she did not analyze, never felt an emotion or struggled with a problem that she did not allow to influence her writing and her thinking.

This wholeness, this entire vital presence of the complete self, is rare. It indicates that Sayers was, in the language of *The Mind of the Maker*, striving to become a unity in her spiritual life with all the deliberation she applied to her art. In our age that strives to separate people into various groups, and even to break down their personalities into discrete "traumas" or "identities," such wholeness of spirit, such unity of being, is something to marvel at and to study deeply. RL

J.C. Scharl *is a poet and playwright. Her work has appeared on the BBC and in many poetry journals on both sides of the Atlantic. Her verse play,* Sonnez Les Matines, *opened in New York City in February 2023 and is available through Wiseblood Books.*

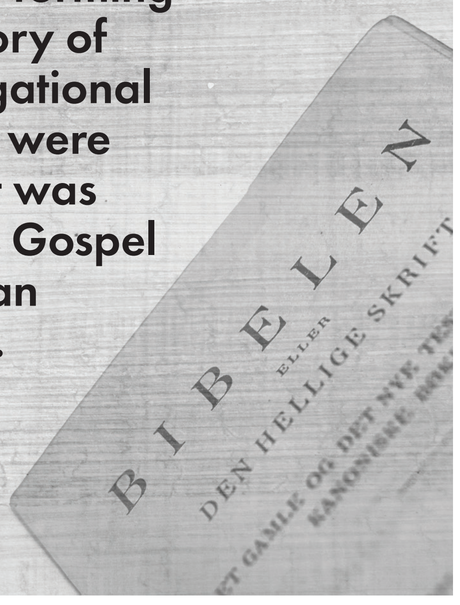


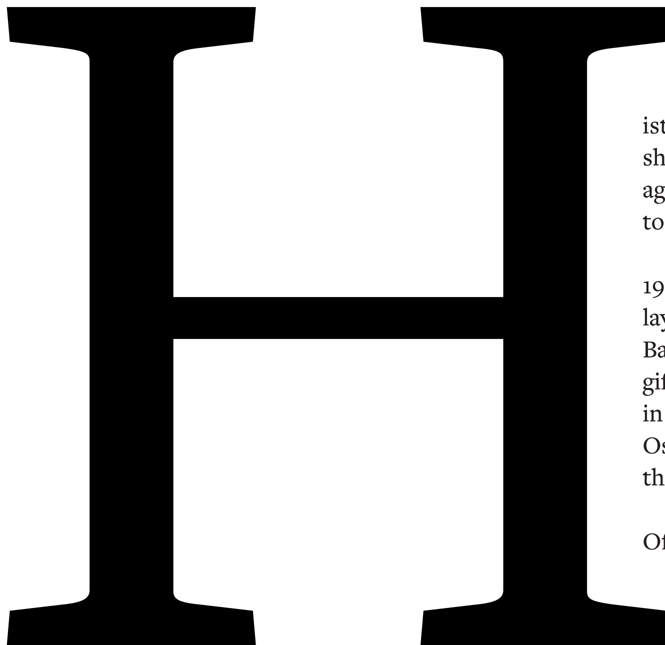
Composite image with 1814 portrait of Georg Sverdrup by Adolph Tidemand; 1528 portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder; detail of 1925 U.S. postage stamp featuring the ship *Viking* in commemoration of Norwegian immigration; undated photo of Norwegian Lutheran Church in Willow City, North Dakota, courtesy of the National Library of Norway / Wikimedia Commons; photo of a Norwegian-language Bible by Jelena Safronova / iStock; and photo of papyrus by Xurzon/ iStock

A FREE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN A FREE NATION

by LARS WALKER

The name Georg Sverdrup may not be familiar, but he was key to forming something new in the history of Lutheranism—a free congregational church in which laypeople were empowered and the spirit was unhampered. But freeing the Gospel from dead traditions can result in a legal mess.





HISTORIANS STUDYING IMMIGRANT religion in America don't generally spend a lot of time on Norwegian Lutherans. We're a fairly small group, after all. But if you're rash enough to "drill down," as they say, you'll encounter a welter and confusion of tiny Lutheran church bodies that split off and recombine like some protean monster out of a Lovecraft story. A book on Norwegian Lutheranism in America will generally contain a chart resembling some OCD attempt to organize a can of worms. (Don't worry, I won't include one here. I'm concentrating on one church body—the Lutheran Free Church [LFC]—and the broad brush is my tool of choice.)

The root cause of this sectarianism may have been the considerable success enjoyed by the Danish kings (who ruled Norway from the 14th to the 19th centuries) in educating their people. They decreed that each of their subjects should get enough schooling to read the Bible and, after 1529, to be familiar with the teachings of Luther's Small Catechism. The catechism was supplemented by a rather larger book, an explanation written in 1737 by Bishop Erik Pontoppidan. That explanation was subsequently revised more than once, notably by Pastor Harald Ulrik Sverdrup (pronounced SVAIRD-roop; 1813–1891), a prominent Norwegian churchman and politician.

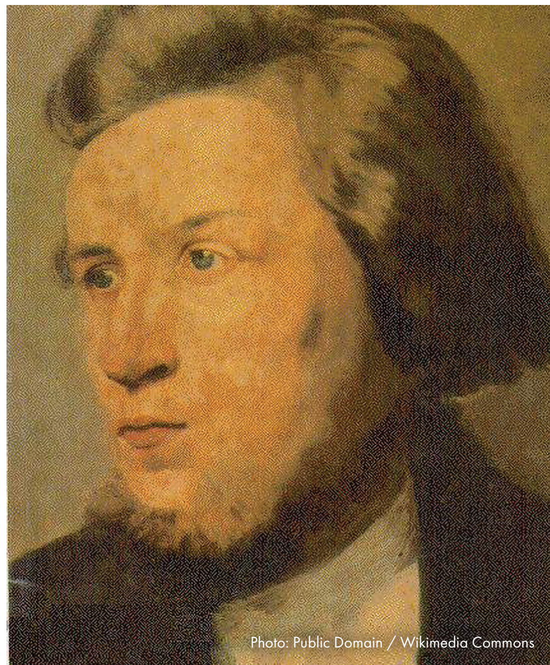
The name Sverdrup gave off a nice ring when you dropped it in those days. Harald's uncle Georg was among the presidents of the assembly that drafted Norway's constitution in 1814. Harald's brother Johan was the country's first parliamentarian prime minister. Their cousin Otto Sverdrup, an arctic explorer, shared command with Fridtjof Nansen on two voyages. Another, younger relation would give his name to a standard unit for measuring seawater flow.

Harald's son Georg (pronounced GAY-org; 1848–1907), the subject of this article, could be expected to lay his own set of laurels on the family altar. Born in Balestrand, where his father was pastor, he proved a gifted scholar from an early age. He took his degree in theology from the University of Christiania (now Oslo) in 1871, going on to study Semitic languages at the University of Paris and various schools in Germany.

But a friendship altered the course of his life. Sven Oftedal (1844–1911) from Stavanger, whom Sverdrup first met at the university, was a member of another prominent Norwegian family, one that produced politicians, religious leaders, scholars, and publishers. The two young men renewed their acquaintance in Paris, forming a symbiotic partnership—Sverdrup quiet and reserved, Oftedal voluble and gregarious. Sverdrup was the Hebrew-language man, Oftedal the Greek maven. For the rest of their lives, they would complement and support each other as colleagues and allies. Both were intelligent young Christians, peculiar products of Haugeanism, a social and religious movement not generally noted for its intellectual vigor. Nevertheless, the world, they understood, was changing all around them. Sverdrup and Oftedal believed they'd figured out a way to shape that change.

Between them, they were hammering out a new idea—for Lutherans, a radical one. The Christian

Portrait of Georg Sverdrup by Adolph Tidemand (1814)



Portrait of Hans Nielsen Hauge by unknown artist (c. 1800)

church, they decided, had gone wrong at a very early stage, when Rome began dominating the other local churches. Based on their reading of the New Testament (in the original Greek, of course), they concluded that the early church was organized around the local congregation. Each congregation was free and equal. No central authority except the Holy Spirit dictated to it. It was then, they believed, that the church had spiritual power. This model must be reclaimed. Lutheranism didn't require any particular form of church government. Luther himself had little to say on the subject. Why not try Lutheran congregationalism—that is to say, a Lutheran free church?

At this point I need to explain a little about the remarkable social and religious movement, Haugeanism, from which these two young men sprang.

PIETISM AND A REBORN CHURCH

The Pietist impulse rose side by side with Romanticism, growing from much the same intellectual (sometimes anti-intellectual) soil. The people at large were sick of being ruled by men of the Enlightenment. Newton had, through no fault of his own, become the effective god of the age. The universe, it was claimed, was a closed system. All important questions had been answered, or soon would be. Christianity, so far as it survived in this environment, was reduced to moralism, stripped of the miraculous and the passionate.

Man, however, cannot live by bread alone. The human heart remained what it had always been (and still is—let the reader understand), for good and for evil. Beneath the surface, the Western world was pulsing with a repressed, half-conscious thirst for wonder, for the transcendent. Pietism, born among German Lutherans, offered a cup of cold water to souls parched by Rationalism. Like the Romantics, the Pietists aspired, looked for hope beyond the

EACH CONGREGATION WAS FREE AND EQUAL. NO CENTRAL AUTHORITY EXCEPT THE HOLY SPIRIT DICTATED TO IT.

> “THE PIETIST IMPULSE ROSE SIDE BY SIDE WITH ROMANTICISM, GROWING FROM MUCH THE SAME INTELLECTUAL SOIL.”

horizon. Unlike the Romantics, they moored their teachings to solid, traditional morality and doctrine.

In Norway, there was a farmer's son named Hans Nielsen Hauge (pronounced HOW-geh; 1771–1824). He had the minimal education common to his class but was unusually bookish and scrupulous. In April of 1796, while plowing his father's field, he experienced what he called his "spiritual baptism," an ecstatic conversion experience that filled him, he recalled, with love for God and neighbor. He took it for granted that he must now help other people to have the same experience. So he began traveling (mostly by foot) from place to place in that mountainous country, leading small meetings in homes. He wrote several books, which he packed on his back and distributed. (Hauge was no systematic thinker; he simply poured his heart out onto the paper. Sometimes he goes on for pages without a period or a paragraph break.) He also had a practical side, spreading modern agricultural technology among the farmers and assisting in the establishment of startup businesses. He himself became a prosperous entrepreneur in Bergen (he plowed the profits back into his ministry).

The difficulty was that he was breaking the law. The Danish-Norwegian Conventicle Act of 1741 made it illegal for any layman to lead a religious meeting without a clergyman present. Surprisingly innocent in some ways, Hauge simply assumed that, since God had called him, he couldn't possibly be violating any lawful ordinance. Even if magistrates disagreed, surely the king would understand. After repeated brief arrests, Hauge was imprisoned in 1804, charged with various crimes. He remained mostly in confinement until 1814. By then, enforced idleness had broken his robust health. But in his later years, even churchmen and government officials would come to pay him their respects on the farm his friends had bought him. His movement was no cult of personality; others took up the work and carried it on with great success in both Norway and America.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

When I do lectures on Lutheran Free Church history, I have to break one important fact gently—Hauge and his followers were liberals in their time. The political party most of the Haugeans joined was the "Venstre" (Left) or "Liberal" Party. It was this party that Georg Sverdrup's uncle Johan represented. Thus, we need to keep in mind as we study Georg Sverdrup's story that he was a liberal—in some ways even a radical—in his day. Of course, at the time, liberalism essentially meant the view that the lower classes deserved economic opportunity and a larger role in running the world. That's what Johan Sverdrup's Venstre Party was all about.

This division between liberal and conservative followed the Norwegian immigrants to America. (Indeed, organized immigration from Norway first began with a sloop-load of Quakers and Haugeans who embarked from Stavanger in 1825.) The Norwegian government and the state church both adamantly opposed this exodus. The only possible reason anyone would want to go to America, they reasoned, was either to get rich (which was covetousness when the poor did it) or to rebel against God's constituted authorities.

1925 postage stamp marking the 100th anniversary of Norwegian immigration

Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

For that reason, they refused for decades to send any Norwegian pastors to minister to the emigrants. When the first pastor finally did show up, he was a Haugean who got himself ordained in Chicago.

Thus, the initial state of Norwegian Lutheranism in America was anarchic, a flock without shepherds. Gradually, however, the sheep began organizing. But the Norwegians were (as they remain) quietly contentious.

When Norwegian state-church pastors finally did arrive, they attracted those settlers who were comfortable with the old state-church model. This group formed the Synod of the Norwegian Evangelical Church in America (generally known as the Norwegian Synod), which had no seminary of its own. To educate their pastors, they sent them to the Germans at the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis. The Norwegian Synod was the largest Norwegian American Lutheran church body.

The Haugeans, a large minority of the new immigrants, were for their own part giddy with religious liberty and disdainful of the Synod, which they considered formalistic and lukewarm. They hadn't forgotten the state church's persecution of Hauge. To them, the Synod was "high church," "confessional" (referring to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and Book of Concord), cold, desiccated, and dead. In the spirit of Hauge, they wanted "living" Christianity—fiery, committed, revivalist. They organized their own church bodies…several of them. For some time, the original Haugean group, commonly known as the Hauge Synod, couldn't make up its mind whether to build a seminary. Some of them weren't convinced an ordained clergy was even necessary. A more moderate faction joined with a group of Danes to form the "Conference of the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," generally known as the Conference. They established a small seminary that they called Augsburg Seminarium in Marshall, Wisconsin, in 1869, the first Norwegian American Lutheran seminary. A pastor from Norway named August Weenaas (VAY-noace) was its first president and almost its entire faculty.

In 1873, the Conference moved the seminary to Minneapolis. That same year, Weenaas persuaded young Sven Oftedal to come over and become professor of the New Testament. The following year, Georg Sverdrup followed, with his wife, to be the Old Testament man.

It hadn't been an easy decision for Georg. Most Norwegian immigrants were poor folk who didn't really wish to leave their families and the beautiful (if economically marginal) land of their birth. They emigrated out of desperate hope for a better life. Georg, on the other hand, could expect only privilege and advancement if he stayed in Norway. His educational attainments and family connections would have opened every door. No office in the country, beneath that of king, would in theory be barred to him.

But he was now convinced there was no way to achieve his free-church dream in Norway. The state church was too conservative, too entrenched and hidebound. When he tried to raise enthusiasm for reforming it on congregational lines, he was laughed at. He could have his career, it seemed, but only at the cost of his dream.

"I have offered up my Isaac," he wrote to Oftedal. "I will come." This is the challenge and conundrum of liberty in every place and time—the gamble, the bet that makes or breaks you. In America, there was no state church. Never before in history had there been an opportunity to build a Lutheran church body from scratch, on new-dug foundations with no underlying

Highview Christiania Lutheran Church (formerly Christiania Lutheran Free Church) in Eureka Township, Minnesota

Photo: McGhiever, CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Photo: Elias G.E. Dorge / National Library of Norway

Sven Oftedal (1844–1911)

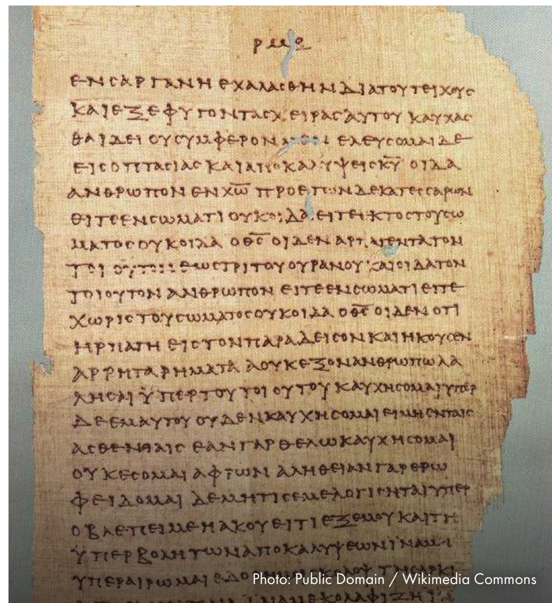


Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

Early Greek New Testament manuscript (Papyrus 46)

stratum of an older church structure. (Even the Missouri Synod Lutherans had started out with a bishop from the old church.) If the free Lutheran church was ever to be built, the United States was where it could be done. Then the world would see.

Now all they had to do was convince the Norwegian Americans.

EMPOWERING THE LAITY

In 1874, before Sverdrup arrived, an article signed by Sven Oftedal and Professor Weenaas appeared in a Norwegian-language paper. It was called "The Open Declaration." It attacked the Norwegian Synod, calling it "rationalistic" and accusing it of "Catholicism." It charged the Synod with promoting spiritual indifference, with being controlling and contemptuous of revival and spiritual life.

The Declaration's intent was to unite the Haugean elements of the Norwegian American community behind Augsburg Seminary and the free-church vision. The result was quite different. Condemnations came from as far away as Norway, and even members of the Conference criticized it. Permanent enmities were conceived in its aftermath. Two years later, Weenaas himself renounced the Open Declaration and returned to Norway. This left Augsburg College and Seminary in the young, radical hands of Sverdrup and Oftedal.

The pair conceived a plan to shape Augsburg into a facility for instructing pastors in Lutheran free-church principles. A college department had been added in 1874, but Sverdrup and Oftedal reconfigured it into a pre-seminary program. "The servant pastor" was a theme to which they would return for the rest of their lives. No longer would the pastor be an aristocrat in his community, as he had been in Norway. The free-church pastor would be a Christian among Christians, not dictating but leading and coordinating lay activities as a conductor leads a choir.

Sverdrup declared Augsburg a "Greek School," as opposed to traditional universities and seminaries, which he called "Latin Schools." The idea was that Greek—the language of the New Testament—prepared pastors for practical work in the congregation. Latin, on the other hand, was a nonbiblical language, the language of the classics, of elite studies that generated scholarly arrogance. The goal of Augsburg, he wrote, was "*menighedsmessig presteuddanelse*," pastoral education oriented to the congregation.

Another favorite term was *barnelærdom*, a Norwegian word with no English equivalent. Literally it means "children's education." To Norwegians, it signified the Lutheran instruction they'd received in confirmation class, the material contained in the Small Catechism and H.U. Sverdrup's revision of Pontoppidan. Master this material, Sverdrup argued, and you have all the theology you really need.

Studying the minutiae of Lutheran doctrine, particularly the massive Book of Concord, though not a bad thing in itself, added little of practical use and tended to puff pastors up.

Another purpose of this emphasis on *barnelærdom* was to raise the status of the layman. If advanced scholarship was required to do the work of the church, then only pastors were qualified to do most anything. Such a division horrified Sverdrup. The free church must be the body of Christ described in 1 Corinthians 12. Everyone must exercise their gifts as God had equipped them.

Lay activity was in fact a central issue in all Sverdrup's controversies. This tension over lay activity went back to Hauge himself. The Fourteenth Article of the Augsburg Confession was often interpreted to forbid anyone but an ordained minister from leading any religious gathering. But informal "edification meetings," led by laymen, were central to Haugeanism and strongly encouraged by the Haugean pastors.

> "THE FREE-CHURCH PASTOR WOULD BE A CHRISTIAN AMONG CHRISTIANS, NOT DICTATING BUT LEADING AND COORDINATING LAY ACTIVITIES AS A CONDUCTOR LEADS A CHOIR."

A CHURCH DIVIDED

Sverdrup's and Oftedal's emphasis came to be known as "the New Direction," and it provoked sharp division in the Conference. As the two professors published editorials and debated fiercely, often in *Folkebladet* (The People's Paper), the newspaper they established, opposition grew, inside and outside the Conference, and financial support and enrollment at Augsburg plummeted. Oftedal made a tour of friendly congregations in newer Norwegian settlements, chiefly in northwestern Minnesota and eastern North Dakota, succeeding in raising (during a time of recession and grasshopper plagues) an endowment of over $50,000. The school's situation improved by stages until 1890.

By that time, there were plans for a merger of several Norwegian American church bodies, excluding the Norwegian Synod but including Augsburg's Norwegian-Danish Conference. It was to be called the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. Initially, Sverdrup and Oftedal were enthusiastic promoters of this merger. They had received assurances that Augsburg would be the sole seminary of the new church body. It seemed to them their great dream was about to come to fruition. Most of the non-Synod Norwegian American pastors, from this point on, would be trained as Free Lutherans at Augsburg. Sverdrup assumed that Augsburg's college division

The title page of the Book of Concord, 1580

CONCORDIA

יהוה

Christliche/

Widerholete einmütige Bekentnüs

nachbenanter Churfürsten/ Fürsten vnd

Stende Augspurgischer Confession/vnd derselben

Theologen Lere vnd glaubens:

Mit angeheffter/in Gottes wort/ als der einigen Richtschnur/ wolgegründter erklerung etlicher Artickel/ bey welchen nach D. Martin Luthers seligen absterben/ Disputation vnd streit vorgefallen.

Aus einhelliger vergleichung vnd beuehl obgedachter Churfürsten/ Fürsten vñ Stenden/ derselben Landen/ Kirchen/ Schulen vnd Nachkommen/ zum vnderricht vnd warnung in Druck vorfertiget.

Mit Churf. G. zu Sachsen befreihung.

Dreßden. M. D. LXXX.

Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

would be included in this arrangement, unifying United Church thinking behind his "Augsburg Plan."

But another group within the merging bodies, "The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood," had just established a college of its own, Saint Olaf, in Northfield, Minnesota. They proposed that Saint Olaf should be the official college of the United Church. Sverdrup viewed this as a breach of the previous understanding. His critics, however, were concerned, beyond theological and church governance considerations, with academic standards. There was a perception, as Carl H. Crislock wrote in his history of Augsburg, *From Fjord to Freeway*, "that Augsburg tended to substitute piety for scholarship." This was ironic considering Sverdrup's impressive personal academic credentials, but it was also more than a little justified by his publicly stated positions.

Both sides dug in their heels. The new United Church demanded that Augsburg transfer all its property to it. Augsburg's board of trustees refused, arguing that they had no legal authority to take such action, as the school belonged to the free congregations.

In 1893, a group of Augsburg supporters gathered at the United Church convention to form an association they called "The Friends of Augsburg." That same year, other United Church members established a new, rival seminary elsewhere in Minneapolis. By this point, Augsburg's membership in the United Church had been reduced to a technicality.

At the 1895 convention, Sverdrup and Oftedal were denied seats. The United Church then expelled 12 congregations for their support of Augsburg. About 100 more congregations followed them out voluntarily. This was the true beginning of the Lutheran Free Church.

In 1896, the United Church sued the Lutheran Free Church for ownership of Augsburg. A Hennepin County judge ruled in their favor, but the LFC appealed. In 1898, the Minnesota Supreme Court reversed the decision based on a legal technicality. By now both sides were ready to compromise. The LFC retained Augsburg College and Seminary in return for part of its library and the entire endowment fund Oftedal had labored so hard to raise.

Through the years that followed, the Lutheran Free Church remained one of the smaller American Lutheran church bodies. The wounds of the controversial years lingered, but Augsburg persisted, the center and heart of Free Lutheranism in America.

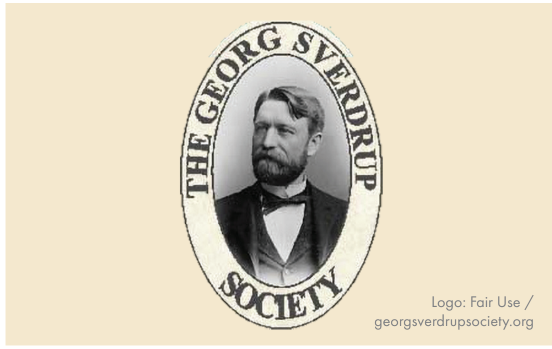
THE FREE CHURCH TODAY

Georg Sverdrup served as president of Augsburg College and Seminary until his death in 1907, aged only 58. Many of his writings were collected posthumously in a six-volume set of *Samlede Skrifter* (Collected Works), edited by Andreas Helland.

And what of the Lutheran Free Church remains?

Old Main at Augsburg University in Minneapolis (2019)

Photo: McGhiever, CC BY-SA 4.0 / Wikimedia Commons



The Georg Sverdrup Society, founded in 2003

It was with the LFC as with so many idealistic schemes, religious and political. It did not long survive the passing of the visionary generation. The LFC continued as a church body for several decades, but its raison d'etre seemed more and more obscure. (It didn't help that Sverdrup wrote only in Norwegian.)

In 1960, a group of Lutheran church bodies voted to merge into a new denomination called the American Lutheran Church (today part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). The LFC, with its congregational polity, took a little longer making up its mind. Congregations and pastors still holding to Sverdrup's principles mistrusted the new church body. It took three referendums before a majority of the congregations finally agreed, and they entered the merger in 1963. Augsburg Seminary was then folded into Luther Seminary in St. Paul, but Augsburg College continued as a four-year institution (which rejoices today in the name, Augsburg University).

A small group of recalcitrant congregations gathered in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, in 1962 to form a legacy body, which they wished to call "The Lutheran Free Church (Not Merged)." (Seriously.) They were sued by the new ALC, which, in the spirit of the dog in the manger, claimed sole right to the Lutheran Free Church name, and prevailed in court. The new group then took the name the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC). I'm a member of that body and served as librarian for their Bible college and seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota, until my retirement. We follow the Lutheran Free Church tradition and, faithful to that tradition, we are small.

It's hard to deny that, in some ways, history seems to have vindicated Sverdrup's critics. The Norwegian Synod theologians, in line with Missouri Synod thinking, had warned that reliance on enthusiasm and subjective experience would inevitably end in a slide toward doctrinal subjectivism. Which is precisely what happened, whether inevitably or not. A friend who attended Augsburg in the 1970s, himself a theological liberal, once told me that the way Augsburg taught the Bible even then was "a crime. They aimed to demolish our faith." Today, Augsburg has a Muslim chaplain on staff and holds Muslim Friday prayers in their chapel, where they also host same-sex weddings.

On the other hand, the Pietists won their share of arguments, too. I don't think many Missouri Synod pastors today mind if a layman leads a Bible study. And doctrine-centered church bodies have also been known to slide into liberalism (the new liberalism, of course, not Sverdrup's kind).

As political radicals believe in perpetual, self-renewing revolution, Sverdrup the Christian radical believed in perpetual revival. The church must not be defined by "dead" doctrine but through the dynamic witness of living congregations, constantly reenergized by infusions of the Holy Spirit. Which should not be taken to suggest that their worship style was in any way "charismatic." The liturgy was low church, centered on Scripture reading, prayers, hymns, and the sermon. The preaching could get fiery, but Sverdrup explicitly rejected speaking in tongues. Altar calls, however, were always in order.

And the LFC's annual conference was explicitly not empowered to be a governing institution—it had no executive authority over the congregations. Rather, it was to be a "spiritual dynamo" (Oftedal's words), its momentum holding the congregations forever on one course. Sverdrup affirmed Lutheran doctrine entirely, but he believed that, without "spiritual life," doctrine was a dead thing, incapable of empowering the work of Christ's body in this world. And that idea has sent roots deep down into all American Lutheranism.

The Georg Sverdrup Society today is devoted to getting Sverdrup's works translated, so that if we Free Lutherans forget the core principles of the Free Lutheran movement, there will be no excuses this time. And now and then, driving past Augsburg on Interstate 94, I say a prayer for the school. I ask the Lord to give it back to us. A quixotic prayer, I know, but truly in the Lutheran Free Church spirit. RL

Lars Walker *is the author of nine fantasy novels, the latest of which is* King of Rogaland. *He is also the editor of the* Sverdrup Journal.

THE PAPAL COURT AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

An Interview with Mary Ann Glendon

by JOHN W. KENNEDY

Mary Ann Glendon, Harvard Law professor emerita and one-time U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, offers a glimpse into the Vatican and what the Church gets right—and wrong—about finance, women, and its own employees.

Photo of St. Peter's Basilica by adisa/ iStock

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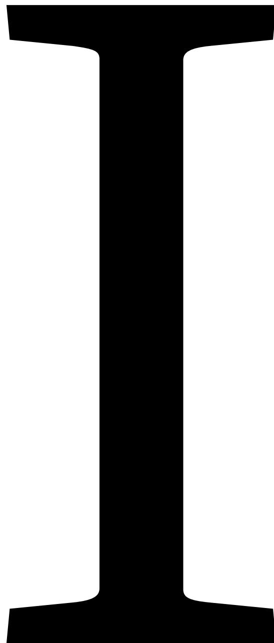


IN HER JUST-RELEASED book, *In the Courts of Three Popes: An American Lawyer and Diplomat in the Last Absolute Monarchy of the West*, accomplished international attorney, diplomat, and Harvard Law School professor emerita Mary Ann Glendon offers readers a unique perspective on the papacies of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis.

In 1995, John Paul II chose her to be the Vatican representative to the UN's World Conference on Women held in, of all places, Beijing. This was in the midst of China's one-child (forced-abortion) policy, which was supposed to reduce excessive population but also caused an acute gender imbalance. (When

Mary Ann Glendon with President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush in 2005

coerced into having only one child, many couples chose to abort a female fetus in the hope of eventually conceiving a son instead.) At the same time, Glendon was called on to defend the Church's absolutist view against any form of artificial contraception. To be sure, no condoms in an era of HIV/AIDS was a hard sell.

In November of 2007, President George W. Bush nominated her for the role of U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See. She was confirmed the next month and presented her Letters of Credence to Pope Benedict XVI in February of 2008. She held the position for nearly a year before resigning in January of 2009.

Four years later, Pope Francis appointed her to a pontifical commission of inquiry investigating the murky goings-on at the Institute for Works of Religion (a.k.a. the Vatican Bank).

Q **Tell me about your personal road to Rome and the Vatican. How does your story begin?**

Mary Ann Glendon: My role in the Vatican—my roles, I guess I should say—started out in 1994, when I was appointed by John Paul II to be a member of the newly formed Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. The year after that I was asked, again by Pope John Paul II, to head the Vatican delegation to the Beijing Women's Conference. In the 24 years after that, I've been all over the Vatican, serving on various councils. You know, I have a full-time job and a family, so this is not an "insider's book" but that of an outsider who had a vantage point from a number of positions in the Vatican. Most recently, I was involved in the reform of the Vatican Bank. Pope Francis appointed me to

be part of a small committee to investigate the bank. Later, I was on the board of directors of the bank. I had another kind of outside look in 2009, when I was the Ambassador to the Holy See. So there's been engagement over a period of about 25 years as a layperson.

Q How did you find yourself in the position of having been chosen by Pope John Paul II?

It all started when I thought, as a layperson, I ought to try to do something to help out the poor old Church, which was—and is—in such difficulties. I started by volunteering to teach a CCD (catechism) class. I can tell you—I was a terrible failure at that. It's much easier to teach Harvard law students than eighth-graders. So I tried something else. I became a lay member of an archdiocesan synod. There I got into the role of being the person asked to write up accounts and reports. That led to a lot of writing assignments in my own archdiocese, including one on Pope John Paul's Letter to Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*. To my surprise, the article I wrote about that for the archdiocese was reprinted in [the Vatican newspaper] *L'Osservatore Romano*. Nobody knows for sure why you get asked to do things by the Holy See, but I think it was that article that led to my being invited to join the Pontifical Academy and then to other things. That's my best guess!

Q One of those other things was to be part of the planning of the Great Jubilee in 2000.

Yes, I was on that committee, which was an interesting experience. It started to give me an insight into what I have come to think is one of the two major problems the Holy See has had in trying to be a sovereign state, with many characteristics of a medieval court, trying to operate in the world of modern states and modern economies. One of those problems is really the internal culture of the Holy See. I call it a "court culture" because it has so many vestiges of the medieval court. The other problem is, to my mind, although we admire John Paul II for so many things—he really was a great pope—one thing that even his most ardent admirers will say is that he was *not* an administrator. He *never was* an administrator, even in Kraków. So this combination of a relative lack of oversight for a very long period combined with a certain internal culture of a court, that to me has hampered the Holy See's ability to function well in the modern world, most notably in the area of finances but in other areas, too.

Propaganda art in Guangdong Province promoting the idea of a one-child family. Accompanying text (not shown) translates to "Planned child birth is everyone's responsibility."

Photo: Clpro2, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons. Edited to correct perspective distortions.

Q **Going back to the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, what was your relationship like with Pope John Paul that he would choose you to represent the Vatican to that event?**

I had met him only a couple of times in connection with the audience of the Pontifical Academy. So when I went to Rome to meet him as his official representative, I was feeling those responsibilities pretty heavily. I asked his press secretary how I should greet him because, you know, I grew up in Massachusetts in pre–Vatican II days. I had seen pictures of women in black, heavily veiled, kissing the ring of the pope. I said, "So how should I greet him?" The press secretary said, "Well, he wants you just to look him straight in the eye and shake his hand." That made me realize, oh, something new is going on here. He wrote this wonderful letter, which he handed to me at that moment. The letter was to the delegation going to Beijing. It said, in part, "I appeal to all men of the Church to undergo, where necessary, a change of heart and to implement as a demand of their faith, a positive vision of women. I ask them to become more and more aware of the disadvantages to which women, and especially girls, have been exposed and to see where the attitude of men, their lack of sensitivity or lack of responsibility, may be at the root." It was quite an astonishing moment.

After that, I got to know him better. He invited me, my husband, and my daughter a few times for dinners in his apartment in the Holy See. I would say that, by the end of his life, I felt I had gotten to know him, not well, but to greatly appreciate his personal warmth and qualities, especially toward my Jewish husband. The pope had so many Jewish friends—and women friends. He was just relaxed with women and members of other faiths in a way that many prelates of his age were not.

Q **While most Catholics would agree that he was a great pope, others might point out that the Church sex abuse scandals were allowed to grow during his tenure.**

Yeah. I think, like other prelates of his generation, he was really gobsmacked by the scandals and stricken. In a sense, he was braced for it because in the lead-up to the Jubilee, some people will remember, he made public apologies for the past sins of the Church on dozens of occasions, kind of what he called a "purification of memory." I think when the sex abuse scandals came along, he was shocked. It took him probably longer than it should have to take it all in and to figure out how to deal with the complexity and the horror of the situation. The scandals really came into publicity in a big way in the year, I think, 2000.

Pope Benedict XVI at the Apostolic Palace in 2011

Photo: Peter Nguyen, CC BY 2.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Pope John Paul II at Mount Adamello in 1988

Photo: Gregorini Demetrio, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

> “I THINK IT’S UNPRECEDENTED IN THE HISTORY OF U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE HOLY SEE THAT THERE WERE THREE MEETINGS IN THE SPACE OF A YEAR BETWEEN BUSH AND POPE BENEDICT.”

Photo courtesy PBH Images / Alamy Stock Photo

President George W. Bush greets Pope Benedict XVI at Andrews Air Force Base in 2008

By the time Benedict came along, in 2005, Benedict started to act more vigorously. I think it was partly the sex abuse scandals, together with the financial scandals, that caused Benedict to feel overwhelmed and just say he wasn’t up to dealing with it and to resign. Of course, Francis acted decisively to establish a commission on minors. By that time, I think we knew more about the Catholic Church’s role in the scandals, the role of priests in the scandals, and we were on the way to watching the Church do what it could to make amends.

Q Would you agree that Benedict—who was known as kind of a stern enforcer of church doctrine—got harsher treatment from the media than Pope John Paul, who perhaps came across as more amiable and had better communication skills?

Oh, yes! Another factor that no one realizes is that Benedict came in just as John Paul II’s longtime brilliant press spokesman Joaquín Navarro-Valls resigned. So Benedict not only did not have John Paul II’s gifts for speaking to the public; he didn’t have a fantastic press spokesman. Although, I have to say that Benedict turned out to be quite the communicator when he settled into the public part of the job. When he gave those political speeches in the Bundestag, in Westminster in London, the Élysée Palace in France, and his speech at the United Nations in 2008, he made a big hit with the press. So it’s true that he was not the communicator that his predecessor was, but he managed to do pretty well when he got the hang of it.

Q You were nominated by President Bush to be the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See during Benedict’s time. You refer to Bush, who is a Methodist, as a “president who spoke Catholic.” Can you tell me about that?

For some reason, to the surprise of most people, the very shy, scholarly Pope Benedict and the very outgoing George W. Bush hit it off extremely well. I think nobody has really figured out what it was that made them take to each other, but I think it’s unprecedented in the history of U.S. relations with the Holy See that there were three meetings in the space of a year between Bush and Pope Benedict. I think partly it was that Pope Benedict appreciated the president’s heartfelt Christianity—and I think partly it was a good time in the relationship between the United States and the Holy See. A few years earlier, there were severe tensions because of our invasion of Iraq, but by the time [Benedict became pope], the Holy See’s main interest was that we should not withdraw from Iraq because of the danger to Christians and other minorities in that country.

So, with that behind them, the two of them were able to concentrate on things they had in common including condemning the use of religion as a pretext for violence, the improvement of interfaith relations and—here's something nobody mentions—the fact that the U.S. is the world's largest donor of humanitarian aid, and the Holy See supervises the world's largest network of humanitarian aid institutions. When I was ambassador, I worked very hard to hold that up and highlight it. I think my biggest regret about my effort was that the press wanted to talk about everything else except that interest in humanitarian aid.

Q **When you were nominated by President Bush in 2007, your nomination was held up or challenged by then-Senator Joe Biden, who accused you of being in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act. What was it like to be hit with that?**

It was like a bolt out the blue, because the Foreign Agents Registration Act has a specific exemption for [religious entities]. I was clearly within the exemption, and the State Department lawyers sent memos to Biden's office. I think what was really going on was that it was toward the end of the Bush administration and Biden just didn't want to approve any more Bush appointees. I wish I could say that we persuaded Senator Biden through reference to the law but, in fact, the problem got solved in the old Boston way. I happened to chair an event in honor of Senator Kennedy's sister Eunice, who was a friend of mine. I went up to Senator Kennedy and I said, "Can you do anything about this problem? Because it's really important to have a U.S. ambassador in place when Benedict comes to the United States next spring." Within days, the Senate unanimously confirmed my nomination. So that was the Boston way.

Q **You describe President Bush, who again is not a Catholic, as having had a very good relationship with the Holy See. President Biden *is* a Catholic. How would you describe his relationship with the Vatican?**

I don't think Biden has a "special relationship" with the Vatican, but I think it's a cordial relationship. I think, as in the case of the Bush administration, there are so many common interests. One is simply that [the Vatican] is what they call a great listening post, a great source of information, because the Holy See has priests and missionaries in the capillaries of societies where the United States and other countries don't have access to that kind of grassroots information. The other reason is that [the Holy See's] interests are very similar to the worldwide interests of the United States. That's why the relationship goes all the back to the beginning of the Republic. It wasn't formalized until President Reagan, but there's a long history of the U.S. having envoys in the Holy See.

> **"THIS BANK ATTRACTED SOME VERY UNSAVORY CHARACTERS, WHICH LED TO THE FAMOUS SCANDALS OF THE 1980S THAT WERE MEMORIALIZED IN *GODFATHER III*."**

Q **Moving ahead, when Pope Francis became pope he appointed you to a commission to assess the condition of the Vatican Bank, which was plagued by scandal. What was that experience like?**

Well, that was probably the most intense experience I had in the Holy See. It was an experience that confirmed my impression that there was something seriously dysfunctional about the internal culture of the Holy See. It also made me understand something about reliance on lay experts. I came to realize that there's nothing in the background or training of most priests and, therefore, of most bishops, cardinals, and popes that enables them to supervise, understand, and run a 21st-century financial institution—a central bank of a prominent state!

So, naturally, they turned to outside assistance, but the lay assistance turned out to be foxes in the chicken coop, because, just as the prelates weren't

Newly recruited Swiss Guards pass the Vatican Bank in 2015

really well qualified to run the bank themselves, they also weren't that well qualified to choose and supervise laypeople. With these vulnerabilities, this bank was just too tempting a target. It attracted some very unsavory characters, which led to the famous scandals of the 1980s that were memorialized in *Godfather III* but then right up to the time Pope Francis formed a commission to which I was appointed.

I was wondering, "Why do we have this commission and what am I supposed to do?" There were only four other people on it. I went over to Rome to get a sense of what was going on. As soon as I got there, the manager and the assistant manager of the bank had to resign under circumstances that involved financial misconduct.

So immediately we acted. We were under a lot of time pressure. We hired outside consultants. We embedded an investigator in the bank. We ran into tremendous resistance. The pope himself had given us a kind of general warrant to go into the bank and investigate everything and open any drawer. It's one thing to have the warrant. It's another thing to run up against that internal culture that blocked us at every stand.

We continued on our investigation for about a year. We proposed a program. That was the very moment when Cardinal Pell came in. Cardinal Pell discovered, to *his* dismay, much of what we had already discovered. What particularly shocked him was something that had to do with the archaic nature of the structure of the Vatican—that there was no central oversight or administration of Vatican finances. He immediately started to look into that, and he was blocked by the man who was just convicted of financial crimes in December in a Vatican court. He blocked Pell, and eventually Pell had to go back to Australia and, well, you know the result.

For the past couple of years, much of the information about what had been going on all that time came out of these Vatican trials, but the story isn't over, because there will be appeals from those convictions. One of the people who was investigating the Vatican financial misconduct—an auditor from the outside—was fired, apparently with the consent of the pope. He now claims to have reams of information of what he discovered in the period when he was auditing. So the beat goes on, but I do think things are getting better, especially where the Vatican Bank is concerned.

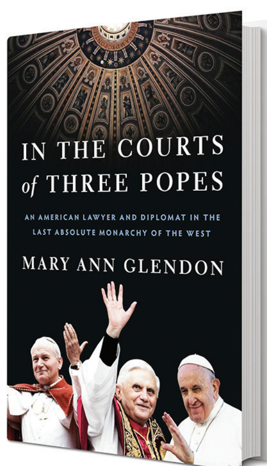
Q What changes do you think should be made regarding the Vatican Bank?

My own view is a complete change from what I thought when I first became involved with the Vatican Bank. My reasoning then was a sovereign state needs a central bank. It's tied in with the sovereignty of the Holy See, and we just have to make it work. I now feel, after four years on the board of directors plus

that year of investigating the bank, that I was mistaken. I think the real question is whether the Holy See needs a bank at all. Many of the services that the Vatican Bank can perform can be performed better by outsourcing to other unquestionably reliable financial institutions. I think that that will be determined in the future. Whether they eventually decide to do that, that will be determined by whether the bank can hold on to a declining clientele. You know, heads of religious institutions who used to keep their money in the Vatican Bank, these religious sisters and priests, a lot of them have MBAs now. They're perfectly capable of deciding where their money is best kept. So I think in view of modern circumstances and the difficulties of establishing best practices within the internal culture of the Holy See, that it may be well to outsource most of what the bank now does.

Q Regarding Pope Francis, you wrote that "Unlike Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who taught, wrote and spoke with great clarity and consistency, Pope Francis speaks more elliptically; his messages are often more ambiguous or hard to interpret; his personality is more multifaceted; and he often seems to contradict himself." That sounds like you're a little critical of him.

Pope Francis has a very different background and a very different set of interests than his predecessors. One was a philosopher; another was a theologian. It's hard to tell what Francis' legacy is going to be. It won't be with writing—most of his writings are committee work—but he has tried to cope with what I think is the essential problem of the Holy See right now—coming to terms with being a rather antiquated institution in the modern world and fulfilling the mission of the Church in the modern world.



In the Courts of Three Popes
By Mary Ann Glendon
(Image, 2024)

I think Francis has focused mainly on what he conceives to be the best way of carrying out the mission, which is, of course, bringing the news of the Gospel to the whole world. My feeling about his legacy is really that it probably will take some time to figure out what it has all meant. You know, it took many, many decades before we really understood the pontificate of Pius XII. I think it will take not that long, but it will take a while to understand whether Francis' vision of what he aimed to do has worked. For example, the China policy, which has been much criticized, his idea was that it was the best policy for protecting Catholics in China. It will be a while before we really figure out the effect of that policy.

Q That policy is where he gives the Chinese government some say in who will lead the Church in China—is that correct?

Well, you know the details of the arrangement he made with China have never been made public, but we're told that the arrangement included that there would be an understanding that bishops would be appointed with the approval of both entities. It seems that China has appointed bishops and not always sought the approval of the pope. It disturbs many people, including me, that the pope, while he speaks out forcefully on human rights in many situations, has not criticized the human rights problems in China, notably those with the Muslim Uyghur minority.

Q From all your experience working in various capacities with the Vatican, what overall reforms do you think the Church needs to implement as we move forward in the new millennium?

I mentioned my concern about the fact that neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI had been a hands-on administrator. I think there are two main roots of the Holy See's problems with governing right now. One is its internal culture. The other is a long period of relative lack of oversight during which many good and faithful prelates did what they were supposed to do but, as they say, when the cat's away the mice will play.

Thinking ahead toward the next conclave, the Church is often described as *Mater et Magistra*,

***John Newman* by Sir John Everett Millais (1881)**

Mother and Teacher. I think the Church is in need of both. It's in need, where doctrine is concerned, of clear and consistent teaching that can be understood by everybody, and a mother in the sense of somebody who will finally take charge of the household. There are many household problems in the Holy See that wouldn't be that hard to clear up.

One that concerns me greatly as a laywoman is human relations [particularly with regard to] the 5,000 or so lay employees in the Holy See. The Vaticanista John Allen, who really has watched the Holy See up close for a long period of time, says, "You think the [only problems] in the Holy See are sex abuse or finance. You should pay attention to the way it treats its own employees." The Church has a huge eloquent teaching on labor relations. It ought to model the high standards in *Laborem Exercens* that it sets for employers in its *own* household. Somebody needs to take a look at the way lay employees, especially women employees, are treated. *Mater et Magistra*: I think that's what the next conclave ought to be looking for.

Q Do you think the Church has a problem with women? Sometimes it appears to observers that it really doesn't know how to deal with questions of women and equality.

I think that what was said by John Paul II in that letter to the Beijing delegation and the model he set in his own appointments of women to important positions—besides myself, a number of women were appointed to councils, commissions, and academies—has just not been followed because of what I call the internal culture. If you've got a lack of oversight from the top and you've got a culture that is set in its ways and may be pretty far behind the times, you're gonna have the situation that John Allen described, where lay employees in general are not treated very well. We have testimony that I quote in my book from two women who have written about the situations they were in *recently* in the Holy See. I have to say—and I think Catholics know this—that, in many parts of the Catholic world, Catholic institutions are not living up fully to what our social teaching expects of them.

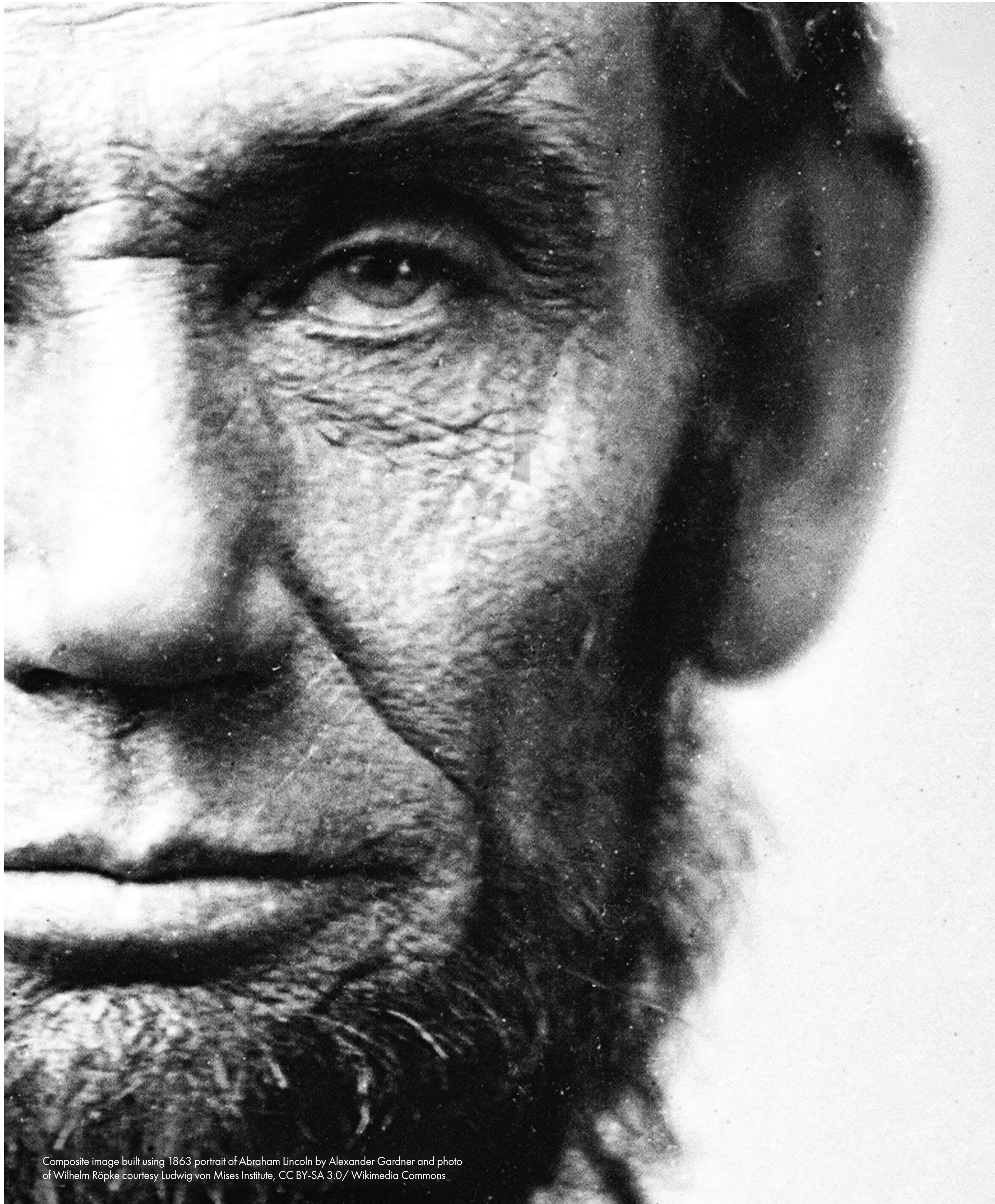
Q You also write in your book about the principle of subsidiarity, which reminds us that large institutions in society should not overwhelm smaller or local institutions, and that, as much as possible, authority should rest with the people who are most local. Does the Church violate that principle a little bit with the authority being too far away from the people?

Lately I've been giving a lot of thought to St. John Henry Newman, who was made a saint by Pope Francis a couple of years ago. In the late 19th century, he kept saying to Church leaders that they do not understand the importance of the laity, whose mission, after all, is to evangelize the secular sphere where they live and work. Laity get into a habit of pay, pray, and obey. Clergy get into the same habit. Newman warned that the time is coming—the world is falling into secularism and you need not only to recognize that laypeople are going to be decisive in how you deal with the secular world but that they need to be prepared for it.

A century later, Vatican II gets around to trying to awaken the clergy to the importance of the laity and awaken laity, whom John Paul II called "the sleeping giant," to their own role. That, I think, still hasn't happened. Recently, somebody asked Cardinal Francis Arinze, who is one of the last living members of Vatican II, "What's the biggest challenge for the Church?" He said: "Get the clergy and the laity to understand the importance of the lay role." That's really where we stand, I think. RL

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

***John W. Kennedy** writes the* Faith, Media & Culture *blog at Beliefnet.*



Composite image built using 1863 portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Alexander Gardner and photo of Wilhelm Röpke courtesy Ludwig von Mises Institute, CC BY-SA 3.0/ Wikimedia Commons

FREE ENTERPRISE FOR THE REPUBLIC:

ON LINCOLN AND RÖPKE

by MICHAEL LUCCHESE

Superficially, it would seem that Abraham Lincoln and Wilhelm Röpke didn't have much in common. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear how each man saw the entrepreneurial spirit as key to both virtue and freedom.

WHAT IMAGE IS MORE quintessentially American than the pioneer courageously moving across the Great Plains in a covered wagon with his family and livestock in tow? In many ways, the hundreds of thousands of families who blazed a trail into the West made up a sort of "marching republic." Their movement represented everything that made the United States the greatest republic in human history: tenacity, grit, and a willingness to challenge the status quo.

Much of this expansion was made possible by the Homesteading Act of 1862, passed by a Republican Congress and signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln. The law provided settlers with 160 acres of land for a nominal fee. It was perhaps the largest act of privatization in American history. Although it may not seem obvious at first, this economic legacy stands as one of the strongest testaments to President Lincoln's commitment to republican liberty.

In fact, entrepreneurship has been one of the forces throughout history that has best vindicated political orders centered on the human person and his God-given rights. Both patriot-statesmen, such as Abraham Lincoln, and Christian humanists, such as Wilhelm Röpke, have seen the relationship between entrepreneurship and the human person's natural freedom, and used that connection to lead their societies into periods of untold prosperity and happiness.

CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AFTER WW I

In the 20th century, Christians in the West formulated a new humanism to address the crises and horrors confronting them. Ideology, be it Soviet communism or German Nazism, begins with a rejection of universal human dignity; ideologues see men as the mere means to the creation of utopias. The Christian humanists believed that these totalitarians had it backward when they put their repulsive ideologies before man. Instead, they believed that the human person must be at the center of all social thought.

Wilhelm Röpke exemplified this disposition when he wrote in his final book, *A Humane Economy*: "My picture of man is fashioned by the spiritual heritage of classical and Christian tradition. I see in man the likeness of God; I am profoundly convinced that it is an appalling sin to reduce man to a means…and that each man's soul is something unique, irreplaceable, priceless, in comparison with which all other things are as naught." For Christian humanists like Röpke, that God created man in His image was a matter of doctrine. All human action must be interpreted in light of that most fundamental truth, and Röpke's contribution was to show that even seemingly mundane commercial life must be interpreted this way.

Röpke, of all people, was eminently qualified to articulate the importance of a doctrine like the *imago Dei*. Born in a small German village to a family of Lutheran ministers and doctors in 1899, Röpke was

Photo: Public Domain / Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

The Rocky Mountains: Emigrants Crossing the Plains **by Frances Flora Bond Palmer, published by Currier & Ives (1866)**

just old enough to serve his native land at the end of the First World War, winning the Iron Cross for valor on the battlefield. Many of the 20th century's finest Christian humanists—C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, to name just two—fought on the Western Front and witnessed firsthand the horrors wrought by the clash of nations.

The trauma of the trenches left them eternally wary of the ideologies, such as nationalism, that led to the war. Although he was on the opposite side of the front, Röpke experienced the same awful awakening as the aforementioned Christian humanists. In his 1959 essay "The Economic Necessity of Freedom," he wrote, "Life in the army had shown what it meant for the individual to exist as part of an apparatus whose every function assumed lack of freedom and unconditional obedience." The young economist-in-training saw the way that illiberal nationalism led to the outbreak of war and how militarism dehumanized millions on the front, so he dedicated himself to a scholarship of freedom to ensure that no other ideology could cause such chaos and tyranny again.

RÖPKE'S HUMANIST ECONOMICS

For Röpke, this meant that his task as an economist was to remind society that a proper respect for the human person entailed a vigorous defense of free enterprise. Command economies, in his view, crush the human person under the weight of centralization; indeed, Röpke explained in *A Humane Economy* that free enterprise "is the only economic order compatible with human freedom, with a state and society which safeguard freedom, and with the rule of law," because "these are the fundamental conditions without which a life possessing meaning and dignity is impossible for men of our religious and philosophical convictions and traditions." Röpke pointed out that the two predominant ideologies of the 20th century, communism and fascism, based their appeals to the people on claims that their respective brands of socialism could manage the economy more effectively than historic capitalism.

As Röpke defended this position through the early 1930s and became a leader of the anti-fascist

Photo courtesy Ludwig von Mises Institute, CC BY-SA 3.0/ Wikimedia Commons

Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966)

resistance, other German intellectuals, such as Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, proudly joined the Nazi Party and mounted spirited defenses of Adolf Hitler's totalitarianism. Just two weeks after Hitler's ascension to the German chancellorship, on February 8, 1933, Röpke's rebellion against the pro-Nazi *zeitgeist* culminated with a public speech in Frankfurt condemning Nazism's socialist economics. Shortly thereafter, Gestapo agents arrived at Röpke's home to threaten him into silence; Röpke and his family fled first to Turkey and then to Switzerland, becoming the first of over 400,000 intellectual refugees to escape the clutches of Hitler's secret police.

After the Allied victory in the Second World War, Germany lay prostrate. Roughly a third of Röpke's homeland suffered communist totalitarianism behind a cruel iron curtain; the major cities of the once-great nation were in ruins; and revelations about the people's complicity with the Holocaust left the moral life of the country in ruins, too. Socialists and other left-wing factions in West German politics laid the blame for the crisis at the feet of what many called "historic capitalism." They argued that market economics, driven by the profit motive, was socially corrosive and resulted in the kind of moral corruption that paved the way for fascism—as exemplified by the failings and eventual collapse of the Weimar Republic.

Röpke and other economists in the German-speaking world actually appreciated elements of this moralistic critique of capitalism because, as Röpke wrote in *A Humane Economy*, it showed that "the market economy is not everything. It must find its place in a higher order of things which is not ruled by supply and demand, free prices, and competition." These economists who embraced liberal economics and a Christian humanist anthropology knew that neither laissez-faire capitalism nor so-called democratic socialism could restore the German people, either materially or morally. Röpke wrote in 1959: "I sided with the socialists in their rejection of capitalism and with the adherents of capitalism in their rejection of socialism.... The third way I have pursued... has come with good reason to be called 'economic humanism.'" Armed with this innovative argument for an economics rooted in a traditionalist anthropology, Röpke's followers in West Germany began constructing concrete policies to restore Europe.

Ludwig Erhard, the West German minister for economic affairs between 1949 and 1963 and eventually chancellor from 1963 to 1966, was one of the statesmen who played a key role in designing and implementing this new, third way, sometimes called the "social market." Like Röpke, he grew up in the German countryside and became an early opponent of Nazi ideology, particularly national socialism's command economics. According to historian Alfred C. Mierzejewski, "Erhard experienced Röpke's works as an emotional reinforcement to his own free market values," especially in terms of policies related to the promotion of free trade, a stable currency, and an end to government-favored cartels.

ERHARD DEVOTED HIMSELF TO EXPANDING FREE ENTERPRISE IN WEST GERMANY WITHOUT ENDING GOVERNMENT-RUN SYSTEMS OF WELFARE.

Vitally important to this vision for economic recovery was an end to price and rent controls, which unfairly restrained growth and entrepreneurship. In this way, Erhard devoted himself to expanding free enterprise in West Germany without ending government-run systems of welfare such as social security, and Röpke defended and encouraged him at every turn from his academic post in Switzerland. Although it encountered challenges along the way, this third way between ideological extremes contributed to what Germans today call the *Wirtschaftswunder*, an economic miracle. In his own work, Röpke declared that the swift recovery of the West German economy "was a unique and instructive example of…how quickly and thoroughly [a nation] can recover from its fall and start on a steep, upward climb if only economic policy recognizes its error and reverses its course."

ECONOMICS AND THE GOOD SOCIETY

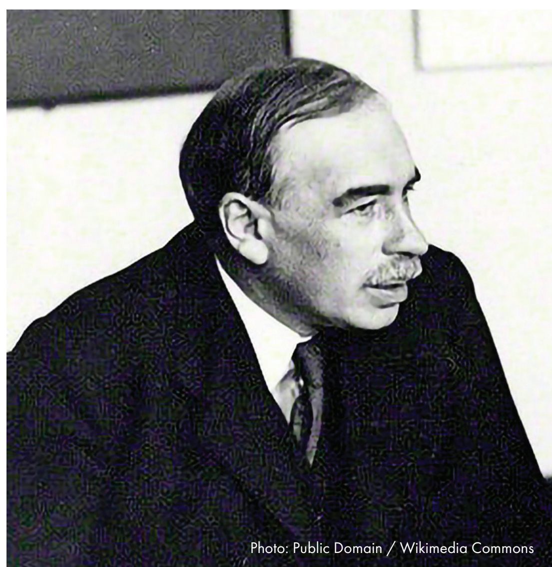
For Röpke, though, this victory was more than economic—it was moral. John Maynard Keynes famously declared that "in the long run, we're all dead," and encouraged his readers to formulate economic policy around short-term incentives. Röpke saw no virtue in such a path; instead, he believed that economic policy should be ordered toward what are often called "bourgeois virtues," such as saving money and planning for the future.

If the aim of the good society, as ancients such as Plato and Aristotle taught, is to set its citizens on the path to virtue, then Röpke's contention was that a market economy could teach people the virtues of responsibility and service. Socialist systems were always preoccupied with the present; bourgeois society, however, was ordered around a healthy respect for the heritage of the past and a concern for passing that heritage on to the future. Röpke wrote that the advocates of bourgeois market economics "have learned to regard the individual, with his family, relying on his own efforts and making his own way, as a course of vital impulses, as a life-giving creative force without which our modern world and our whole civilization are unthinkable."

Röpke, then, organized his ideas about bourgeois economic life and the virtues it entails around the centrality of the human person through the concept of entrepreneurship. In *A Humane Economy*, Röpke compared the entrepreneur to a ship's captain, navigating "the sea of human nature" spurred on by competition and the profit motive. Channeling the thought of Austrian economists such as Israel Kirzner, Röpke here suggested that, ultimately, the entrepreneur is serving other men.

Indeed, Röpke argued that the entrepreneur looked to serve other men even in his pursuit of the profit motive. As he put it once in an essay, "The great error of socialism is its steadfast denial that man's desire to advance himself and his family, and to earn

Economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946)



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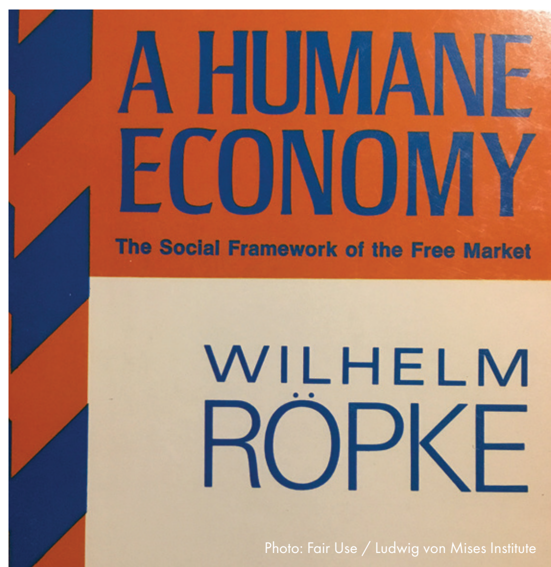
Röpke's *A Humane Economy* (1958)



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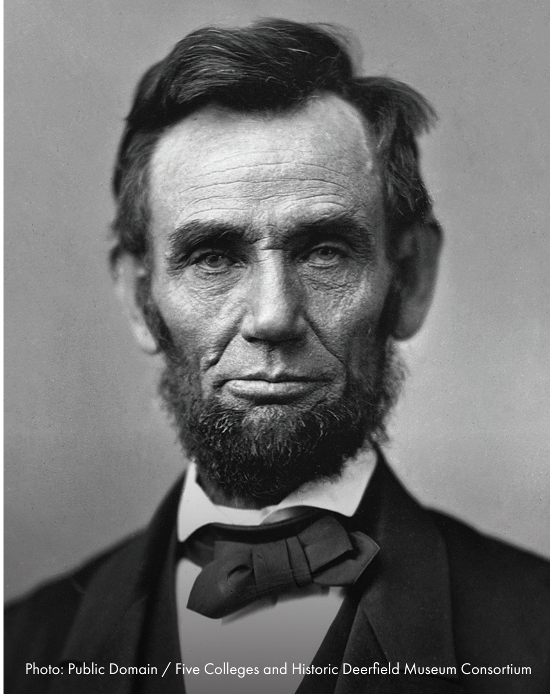

Portrait of Lincoln by photographer Alexander Gardner, taken 11 days before the Gettysburg Address (1863)

and retain what will provide his family's wellbeing far beyond the span of his own life, is as much in the natural order as the desire to be identified with the community and serve its further ends." A humanist society is a civilization of love, ordered toward the common good of all men. If what Röpke wrote about free enterprise is true, what better way is there to build such a civilization than to unchain the entrepreneur and enable him to serve the human person?

> **"RÖPKE'S SUPPORT FOR FREE ENTERPRISE STEMMED FROM THIS CENTRAL PRINCIPLE OF MAN AS *IMAGO DEI*."**

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S ECONOMICS OF EQUALITY

When we consider Abraham Lincoln alongside the verb *unchain*, we probably imagine the Great Emancipator doing something quite different than the economic reforms made by Erhard and Röpke in postwar West Germany. After all, if these German economic humanists are associated with peacefully rolling back government's authority in the private sector, then is not Lincoln famous for maintaining the authority of the government through one of the bloodiest wars in U.S. history? It may therefore seem paradoxical to link Wilhelm Röpke and Abraham Lincoln. But Röpke's economic humanism and Lincoln's ideas about republican society share a traditional vision of the human person and have much else in common.

For Lincoln, the central fact of the American regime is what he called at Gettysburg "the proposition that all men are created equal." In his view, the republic's Founders shaped everything about this country's form of government and the citizens' way of life around that central, self-evident truth. Take, for instance, what Lincoln said about the Declaration in an 1858 campaign speech in Chicago, Illinois. Pointing out the waves of immigrants that arrived on American shores since the founding, Lincoln argued that all these men were heirs of the American Revolution just as much as those descended by blood from the Founders, because:

> When they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in their day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.

For Lincoln, the most important truth of all political life is the moral principle that all men are created equal and therefore endowed by their Creator with certain natural, inalienable rights. Lincoln argued in the same speech that this is why his opponent for Illinois' U.S. Senate seat, Stephen A. Douglas, was wrong to say that the various states should decide whether to permit chattel slavery within their

First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln **by Francis Bicknell Carpenter (1864)**

borders. This so-called popular sovereignty was a chimerical argument, according to Lincoln; if it can be said that the man stolen from Africa into slavery is not of equal dignity to the republican citizen of a state like Illinois, then what is the foundation for American freedom? Lincoln asked his audience at Chicago, "If one man says [the Declaration] does not mean the negro, why not another say it does not mean some other man? If that Declaration is not the truth, let us get the statute book in which we find it and tear it out."

In the epilogue to his book *International Economic Disintegration*, Röpke wrote something quite similar to Lincoln's statement at Chicago, namely that "the antithesis of tyranny is not democracy—a word that only indicates where power is vested—but the liberal principle which, now as always, imposes on every government, however it is constituted, the limits required by tolerance and respect for the *inalienable rights* of the individual." While Röpke framed his humanistic politics around the historical Christian doctrine that all men are created in the image of God, Lincoln framed his anti-slavery politics around the historical American doctrine that all men are created equal.

As has already been demonstrated, Röpke's support for free enterprise stemmed from this central principle of man as *imago Dei*; how, then, did Lincoln's notion of human equality influence the great statesman's political economy?

> **"LINCOLN SAID, 'WE DO WISH TO ALLOW THE HUMBLEST MAN AN EQUAL CHANCE TO GET RICH WITH ANYBODY ELSE.'"**

In the first place, Lincoln was always careful to establish that, when he spoke of equality, he never meant this as an imperative to level society such that all men enjoy—or perhaps suffer—an equality of economic outcomes. In an 1860 campaign speech in New Haven, Connecticut, Lincoln said, "I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good. So while we do not

propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with anybody else.” If all men are created equal, according to Lincoln, then no man deserves special privileges afforded to him at the expense of anyone else. Indeed, Lincoln continued:

> When man starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his own life.…I want every man to have the chance—and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he *can* better his condition; when he can look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him!

This is Lincoln’s American dream, one rooted in the notion of self-improvement and free labor.

In an earlier speech at Cincinnati, Ohio, Lincoln directly contrasted this system of free labor with the system of slave labor that Southern radicals defended. Lincoln said that these fire-eaters claimed that the black man was by nature inferior to the white man, and therefore his servile state was a consequence of his creation. The future president went on to reject such a position wholesale, and turned to an absurd analogy to prove his point:

> I hold that if there is any one thing that can be proved to be the will of God by external nature around us, without reference to revelation, it is the proposition that whatever any one man earns with his hands and by the sweat of his brow, he shall enjoy in peace.…I hold if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all of the eating and none of the work, He would have made them with mouths only and no hands, and if He had ever made another class that he had intended should do all the work and none of the eating, he would have made them without mouths and with all hands. But inasmuch as He has not chosen to make man in that way, if anything is to be proved, it is that those hands and mouths are to be cooperative through life and not to be interfered with. That they are to go forth and improve their condition,

An Iron Curtain–era border station between the Czech Republic and Austria (2019)

Photo: FotoGablitz / iStock

> as I have been trying to illustrate, is the inherent right given to mankind directly by the Maker.

Lincoln became the great antagonist of slavery because he viewed it as a violation of two great moral principles: first, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and second, that one of those inalienable rights, what the Founders called "the pursuit of happiness," was the right to self-improvement, or what we might call the entrepreneurial spirit.

EQUALITY, DIGNITY, AND A WORLD IN CRISIS

The issue of slavery boiled over into a crisis and then erupted into war. At Gettysburg, Lincoln famously defined the Civil War as a challenge to the American proposition that all men are created equal, "testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." The American republic was exceptional, according to Lincoln, not in the sense that the crimes committed by its citizens could be excused by some notion of chauvinist superiority. Instead, Lincoln's sense of American exceptionalism is something more like a burden to prove that human liberty can serve as a solid foundation for a virtuous society.

Wilhelm Röpke held that the Cold War was a similar moment in the course of human events. "Surely everyone must realize by now," he wrote in *A Humane Economy*, "that the world war against Communism cannot be won with radio sets, refrigerators, and wide-screen films. It is not a contest for a better supply of goods.…The truth is that it is a profound, all-encompassing conflict of two ethical systems in the widest sense, a struggle for the very conditions of man's spiritual and moral existence."

Both Lincoln and Röpke believed that nothing short of the future of human liberty was at stake in their time, and that, to use one of Lincoln's most famous phrases, "*we* cannot escape history. We…will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation."

All the same, it must be admitted that neither Röpke nor Lincoln perfectly lived up to their principles. At the height of the Cold War, Röpke wrote in defense of South African Apartheid, and in the 1850s Lincoln occasionally indulged in racist rhetoric. But these unfortunate remarks should not undermine our confidence in the principles of human dignity they articulated. Rather, the searing pain these hypocrisies cause should remind us just how universal these principles are, and how much work still needs to be done on their behalf.

THE COMMON THINGS

Lincoln and, to a lesser extent, Röpke provide models for how a statesman can guide and aid his people through this "fiery trial." But what can the ordinary citizen do? How can free laborers vindicate liberty in the face of tyranny, be it slave power or socialism? Both Lincoln and Röpke might answer those questions by turning, once again, to the entrepreneur. One contemporary thinker in the free labor tradition of both Lincoln and Röpke, John McNerney, wrote in his book *Wealth of Persons: Economics with a Human Face* that "in order to recapture an understanding of the motivation of the entrepreneur, we can paraphrase Socrates by saying, 'the art of the entrepreneur does not think about what is good for the art of *entrepreneuring*, but what is good for the *body-economic*,' that is, the common good of all persons who are participants in the economic drama."

The term *republic* comes from an old Latin phrase, *res publica*. Roughly translated to English, it means "the common things." Republicanism, from the time of Cicero down through Abraham Lincoln to Wilhelm Röpke, and even into our own time, is that way of government which puts the common good of all above the private good of any single individual or faction. Lincoln and Röpke, in their systems of free labor and the social market, articulated a way in which the entrepreneur becomes the ultimate republican figure, the chief servant of the common good.

By harnessing the profit motive in the context of a traditionally virtuous society, free enterprise enables society to turn even the most commercial and seemingly self-interested human actions to the service of the common good. Free enterprise, rightly understood, means that the republic protects the human person, and the human person enhances the republic. RL

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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Fr. James V. Schall, S.J.: Chestertonian Scholar

by **DAN HUGGER**

PICK UP ANY of the many books by Fr. James V. Schall, S.J., and you'll immediately notice two things. First, Schall's immense learning and erudition is to be found on every page. Second, you'll note his equally ubiquitous wit and humor. The combination of scholar and raconteur is rare. Most scholarly tomes are dry as mummies and obscure as the hieroglyphs that adorn their tombs. Most tellers of tales craft their shaggy baggy stories for the mere amusement of their audience or perhaps themselves: their rhetoric a source of diversion rather than enlightenment. Those who successfully combine the virtues of scholarship and rhetoric while avoiding their excesses are the greatest of teachers.

Born in Pocahontas, Iowa, in 1928, Schall's own early education was typical for men of his generation: a boyhood educated in local public schools and two years of his early manhood in the U.S. Army, from 1946 to '47. Upon entering the Society of Jesus in 1948, his education intensified as he passed through a succession of the order's institutions of higher learning, attending first Santa Clara University, then Gonzaga University, where he earned an M.A. in philosophy in 1955, and then Georgetown University, where he earned a Ph.D. in political theory in 1960. After his ordination in 1964, Fr. Schall would earn another M.A. the next year, this one in sacred theology.

The dual nature of this formation is striking. Common and rarefied. Civil and religious. Ordinary and extraordinary. This allowed Fr. Schall to appreciate people from all walks of life and to engage with them on the most abiding questions of existence in both the classroom and writing.

For nearly 50 years, from 1964 until his retirement in 2012, Fr. Schall would have a teaching vocation alongside his priestly one. From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, he would serve on faculties at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and the University of San Francisco. His longest faculty tenure began in 1977 at Georgetown University, where he was a fixture in the Department of Government until his retirement. During his long service to that institution, he was awarded the Edward B. Bunn, S.J. Award for Faculty Excellence three times.

Fr. Schall's teaching, however, was not limited to the classroom. He published widely, across disciplines, in many forms, addressing varied audiences. He published academic books in political philosophy such as *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundation of Political Philosophy*, popular pamphlets like *A Student's Guide to Liberal Learning*, scores of book reviews, and hundreds of columns. He was a master of the essay form, and many of his more than 30 books were collections of them on religion, education, politics, and literature.

He wrote a number of essays on the English writer and critic G.K. Chesterton, many collected in the book *Schall on Chesterton: Timely Essays on Timeless Paradoxes*, and he edited two

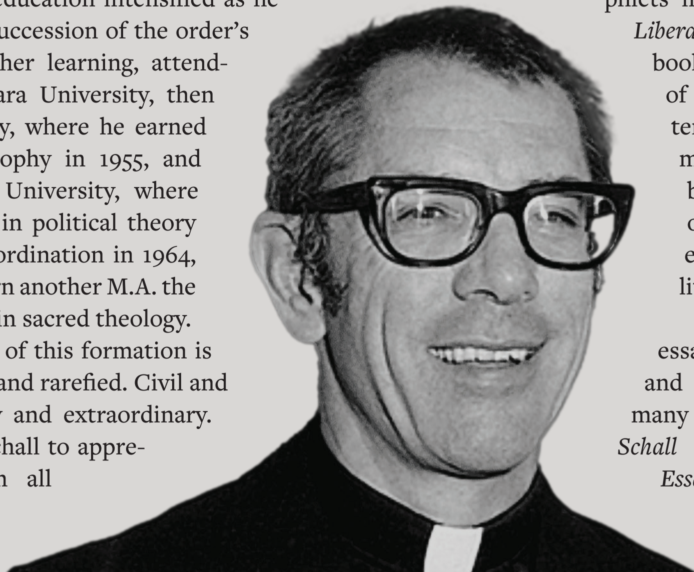

Photo courtesy Intercollegiate Studies Institute

volumes of Chesterton's collected works. The wit, levity, curious digressions, tensions, and paradoxes so abundant in Chesterton abound also in Schall's writing. Like Chesterton himself, Schall could deploy what might first seem a mere bit of rhetorical play only for it to detonate into a sprawling dialectic with serious implications for our understanding of the world.

In his moving obituary for Fr. Schall, published in *Crisis* magazine, the theologian Marc D. Guerra describes how Schall's embrace of theologically informed tension and paradox shaped his understanding of the political order:

> Because he understood that the realm of human affairs has a dialectical relationship with Christian revelation, Fr. Schall, like Augustine, was able to take the political order on its own terms. He was never tempted to make the political order carry more weight than it could bear—to turn it into a "substitute metaphysics." Nor was he willing to downplay its legitimate virtues and possibilities. As a result, he could speak unambiguously as both a Catholic and an American. Recognizing the genuine strengths and weaknesses inherent in American democracy, he never succumbed to the exaggerated hopes for a Christianized America like some Neo-Conservative thinkers did in the 1980s and 1990s. For the same reason, in contrast to today's most vocal advocates of a quasi-theological Benediction [*sic*] Option, he saw the folly (and ingratitude) in denying and depreciating the genuine benefits that American democracy affords Christians and non-Christians alike.

Fr. Schall's intellectual dexterity and penetrating insights into the tensions and paradoxes of human affairs also comes through in his understanding of political economy. A few years before his death, Fr. Schall published a monograph in the Acton Institute's Christian Social Thought series titled *On Christians and Prosperity*. In true Chestertonian fashion, he opens this book with a meditation on the paradoxes of poverty:

> Poverty is *not* best dealt with by attending to the immediate relief of the very poor. Yet, we do not here avoid or bypass the fact and nature of dire poverty.…We argue significantly that the great numbers of the poor are best helped to be what they initially strive to be, namely, *not poor*, when everyone prospers as a result of his own initiative and work.…To reduce the problems of the world to one factor, poverty, shows little comprehension of the forces within human nature.

The economic problems of society are fundamentally human problems that cannot be solved by a simple redistribution of resources from the haves to the have-nots. Economic problems such as poverty are problems of knowledge and coordination between people:

> The primary cause of the vast improvement in the condition of the world's poor in recent decades is not so much our giving to the poor what they wanted or needed. It is the development of the means of production and distribution that made it possible for the poor to enter into more productive relationship with those who had already figured out how not to be poor.

Just as the political order must be taken on its own terms, so the economic. Exaggerated hopes and ingratitude for the immense progress made by expanding networks of specialization and trade must be rejected: "Yet, discussion and debate about better and worse ways to achieve prosperity will always remain, even in successful societies." Prosperity depends on the empowerment of people to draw upon their own initiative and work to transform their circumstances as free and responsible persons created in God's own image and likeness.

Despite an extensive formation and vocation in higher education, Fr. Schall was convinced that, in our 21st century, "we live in a time evidently when truth is fleeing the Academy." Since his passing in 2019, the worrying trends have continued. He was nevertheless convinced that restless souls dissatisfied with dumbed-down, materialist, careerist, or politicized curricula would themselves search for "another sort of learning." This learning, Fr. Schall teaches that Aristotle teaches, begins with wonder. Fr. Schall never lost that sense of wonder. He inspired it in his own students during his life. He continues to inspire it in us with the books he left to us when he entered the presence of the Lord in eternity. RL

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

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James Webb Space Telescope NIRCam image of the "Cosmic Cliffs" in Carina Nebula. Photo: NASA.

The "God" of the "Philosophers"

If you had any doubts that the New Atheism is a spent force, a new book will dispel them. And if you ever wonder whether Christianity has something unique to offer in the debate over God's existence, the same book will prove an occasion of doubt, unfortunately.

by **JUSTIN BRIERLEY**

AS A PODCAST and radio host who deals with the intersection of faith, culture, and philosophy, I've moderated hundreds of debates between Christians and atheists over the past two decades. One of the most memorable encounters was with Peter Atkins, an emeritus professor of chemistry at Oxford University.

An outspoken atheist, Atkins is well-known for his brash style of debate that frequently involves deriding the faith claims of any believer as "lazy thinking," "poppycock," or worse. The guests I have brought on to challenge Atkins, the "New Atheist" par excellence, are usually braced for his theatrical mockery and happy to shrug off any impolite remarks.

On one occasion, I invited him to debate the origin of the laws of the universe with Hugh Ross, a leading Christian astrophysicist. Ross, who founded the science and faith organization Reasons to Believe, argues that the properties of the universe—its beginning in time and the extraordinary degree to which it seems to be fine-tuned to allow life to exist—are evidence of a creator behind the cosmos. Naturally, Atkins disagreed and pushed back with his usual rhetorical bluntness.

I eventually asked Atkins what sort of evidence might come close to making him open to the concept of God. Was there any chink in his atheist armor? For instance, what if the stars in the sky lined up to spell out "Peter, please believe in me—it's about time"?

"I'd put it down to personal madness," Atkins responded.

Christian astrophysicist Hugh Ross in 2022

Atheist Richard Dawkins in 2010

"In that case, it sounds like there's no evidence that would persuade you away from atheism," remarked Ross.

"To be honest, I think that's probably the case," replied Atkins.

Atkins' frank answer was revealing. I could probably have given him a dozen more lines of hypothetical evidence for God and been met with similar naturalistic explanations: A Christian prophet predicts everything that happens to you over a 24-hour period? A lucky guess. Someone is healed of lifelong blindness in front of you? Weird things happen. Jesus appears in the room and personally asks you to believe in him? I must be dreaming.

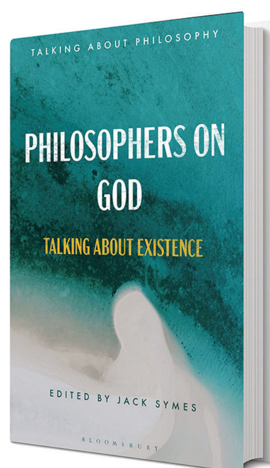
Even those who claim to "follow the evidence" may have erected invisible barriers that cannot be crossed. Some types of explanation are simply off the table. And for someone like Atkins, the "God" explanation is simply…unthinkable.

Atkins may represent an extreme example of inflexible skepticism. But it's helpful in explaining why a book on the philosophical arguments for and against God will inevitably be limited in its ability to persuade. Many people—of both the believing and nonbelieving sort—have already made up their minds and tend to filter any new arguments through their already-established worldview. It's a very human trait. Few of us exist as show-me-the-evidence-and-I'll-believe, open-minded enquirers.

Perhaps Jack Symes, editor of *Philosophers on God: Talking about Existence* isn't too concerned about changing the mind of any particular convinced believer (or nonbeliever). As atheist novelist Philip Pullman's honest endorsement of the book's varied arguments for and against God states, "None persuaded me completely. I end much as I began…no wiser than before, but much better informed."

In gathering together a set of conversations with notable thinkers across the faith and non-faith spectrum, perhaps Symes hopes at least to show the average interested agnostic that there's a lively conversation going on in the realm of philosophy, science, and theology, even if he doesn't intend to persuade anyone to change their mind.

The book's 12 contributions are mostly based on edited transcripts of interviews adapted from Symes' own *Panpsycast* podcast, which frequently features him in conversation with leading thinkers on consciousness, philosophy, and metaphysics. There are also some bespoke articles that outline the views of the authors in question.



Philosophers on God: Talking about Existence

Edited by Jack Symes

(Bloomsbury Academic, 2024)

An impressive cast has been assembled, including well-known names such as William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett (who passed away only recently). These thinkers represent the familiar "Christian theists vs. New Atheists" section of the book, but a number of other perspectives are also present, including Muslim, Hindu, and pantheist contributors.

The book is aimed squarely at an entry-level reader, and Symes does an admirable job of introducing and appending each chapter with his own nontechnical commentary on the philosophical concepts outlined. There are also "info" boxes scattered throughout each chapter that explain a variety of the concepts and figures referenced. A smattering of humor accompanies most entries (you'll often find out which film actors' work Symes does and doesn't appreciate). These will be received either as a dose of sugar to help the medicine go down or a grating intrusion after a while.

Personally I quite enjoyed the humor, but what did mildly irk this particular reader was Symes' insistence on referring to God as "she" whenever a pronoun was required. If the point was to appear academically neutral regarding historic norms around anthropomorphic terminology for God, then you might expect both genders to appear in equal measure. Exclusive use of "she" feels like a ham-fisted attempt at being provocative, or perhaps (with a knowing wink) betrays Symes' own skepticism as to the existence of a personal God. Nevertheless, most of the time the editor charitably represents the views of each contributor, without giving away too much about his own philosophical commitments.

Knowing where the host of these various conversations stands himself, however, will help the reader parse the overall thrust of this book.

Symes himself is not a theist, but he's not exactly a typical atheist naturalist either. He's an adherent of an increasingly fashionable position called "panpsychism"—the view that consciousness is the fundamental constituent of reality and that everything, from the smallest atom to the most complex human brain, is "conscious" at some level. His first book, a similar collection of conversations titled *Philosophers on Consciousness*, conveyed the variety of views on neuroscience and the mind that exist. It's a natural next step to cover the God question, which lurks only a step or two behind the consciousness question.

While the worldviews on offer here are diverse, the order in which they are represented in the book is not insignificant.

We begin with three Christian philosophers—Daniel Hill, Richard Swinburne, and William Lane Craig—along with one Muslim philosopher, Mohammad Saleh Zarepour. These four collectively represent a general case for monotheism.

Significantly, apart from some disagreement about whether God can be a Trinity, there's nothing terribly "Christian" about the case for God made by the Christian contributors. Jesus does come into view briefly when William Lane Craig answers questions about his death and resurrection. However, the focus is on cosmological and philosophical arguments for a creator God that can just as happily be employed by Muslim protagonists. Indeed, Craig's famous "Kalam Cosmological Argument" was proposed in its first form by a medieval Muslim philosopher.

> **"THERE'S NOTHING TERRIBLY 'CHRISTIAN' ABOUT THE CASE FOR GOD MADE BY THE CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTORS."**

Admittedly, each contributor is at the mercy of what the editor chooses to focus on. Likewise, there's nothing wrong with using these arguments; many have found them very persuasive. But to hear only abstract arguments for a deity from Christian philosophers is to miss the very heart of Christianity—the incarnation and the very distinctive sort of God revealed through the historical Jesus' death and resurrection.

Next we are treated to four atheists making the case for why God does not exist. Appropriately, two of the original "four horsemen" of New Atheism are represented: Richard Dawkins and the late Daniel Dennett. This time, the atheist quartet is completed by Susan Blackmore and Stephen Law, who both do their best to channel the spirit of the original four

horsemen (which included the late Christopher Hitchens and the still very-much-alive Sam Harris).

These four atheist thinkers are well known in their spheres of influence. For a book titled *Philosophers on God*, however, it's unclear why Dawkins (a biologist) and Blackmore (a psychologist) are included. They certainly have their reasons for disbelieving in God…but they aren't very philosophical ones.

Blackmore asserts that God belief is a "memeplex," an evolutionary misfiring that results in our believing in false and potentially dangerous religions. But it's been noted by scientist-theologians such as Alister McGrath that, unlike biological genes, the concept of memes rests on a very shaky ontology. Yet this is only half the problem with Blackmore's chapter. The real issue is that her critique of religion never intersects with any of the philosophical arguments for God that have been presented in the previous four chapters.

The same is largely true of Dawkins' contribution, "Why I'm an Atheist." He argues (as he has many times elsewhere) that we no longer need God now that we have Darwin. Whatever you think of his thesis, its simply fails to connect with any of the actual arguments for God in contemporary philosophy. When the biologist does interact with some of the arguments from cosmology and fine-tuning, his responses are underwhelming as philosophical critiques.

It's not that I blame Dawkins; after all, he's a biologist not a philosopher. But I can imagine many atheist readers feeling let down given the many very capable atheist philosophers in existence who could have engaged more fruitfully with the opening arguments in the book. As it stands, the arguments of the New Atheists and the Christian philosophers seem to pass each other like ships in the night.

I was also left with the nagging feeling that the atheist contributions feel very, well, mid-2000s. Now that New Atheism itself has waned, the New Atheist talking points of Dawkins, Blackmore, and Dennett feel somewhat dated.

Most cultural thinkers have long shed the dewy-eyed optimism of the New Atheist promises of a utopian future based on science and reason. The quasi-religion of the postmodern ideologies that have replaced Christianity in the West and their attendant culture wars are not seen as signs of progress. Even Dawkins seemed to be pining nostalgically for a more civil age in a recent viral video in which he declared himself a "cultural Christian."

Likewise, many other secular intellectuals, such as Douglas Murray, Jordan Peterson, and Tom Holland, have been asking where exactly we are heading in the absence of Christianity. Significantly, in her case against religion, Blackmore approvingly mentions the example of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's rejection of her fundamentalist Islamic upbringing. Hirsi Ali went on to become the most famous female representative of the New Atheist movement. Yet, in November last year, Hirsi Ali famously declared herself a Christian, precisely because she sees Christianity as the only possible bulwark against a variety of threats to Western democracy. Moreover, she wrote that "atheism failed to answer a simple question: what is the meaning and purpose of life?"

In my own recent book and podcast series *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*, I profile why the New Atheism grew old and how a plethora of secular thinkers such as Hirsi Ali, Holland, Murray, and Peterson are increasingly pointing their audiences back toward the value of faith. Reading the anachronistic arguments of Blackmore and Dawkins only confirmed my sense that the New Atheism is well and truly over as an intellectual project.

Following in their footsteps, philosopher Stephen Law contributes his entertaining-but-somewhat-quirky "Evil God" argument against theism, and Daniel Dennett riffs on his well-worn thesis that religion is a result of our overactive wiring for agency detection. Breaking up this extended case for scientific naturalism, we are treated to an esoteric theistic response to the problem of suffering from philosopher Yujin Nagasawa.

The various theistic and atheistic accounts of God and existence are evidently intended to build upon

Ayaan Hirsi Ali speaking at CPAC, 2016

Photo: Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

each other as, in his accompanying commentary, Symes seeks to point out the key points of connection and disagreement between them. Naturally, there are many more perspectives that could have been included, such as classical arguments for God in the Thomistic tradition, the moral argument, and evidential arguments from history, but one book can contain only a limited range of views, and Symes presents a selection of perspectives he finds most interesting.

But if Symes intends to lead us in any particular direction in the end, then it is the final trio of thinkers who seem to give the game away.

First there is a conversation with Silvia Jonas on why she believes that the whole project of natural theology in support of a personal God who created the universe is a dead end but that the divine may still be usefully invoked in questions of meaning and morality. This is followed by Hindu philosopher Jessica Frazier arguing for "Brahman"—the view that divinity and the universe are intertwined—and Hinduism's traditional polytheism as an anthropomorphic expression of a transcendent "core."

The climax comes in the final chapter as Asha Lancaster-Thomas, a pantheist, argues that God and the universe are the same thing. On this account, all the preceding debates between theists, atheists, and agnostics can be settled by simply giving the universe an alternative name. And this (I suspect) is where Symes also lands, as *pantheism* is almost synonymous with panpsychism. God is the unity of consciousness, the universe is the totality of consciousness, ergo the universe is God.

Personally, I find pantheism a pointless sort of philosophy. It stretches the concept of God so thin and is so all-encompassing that it fails to say anything interesting at all. Lancaster-Thomas says her pantheism inspires her "to be good to the ultimate reality we exist in, to live in harmony with the world, to further our understanding of the cosmos." It's all admirable stuff but could equally be the bumper sticker sentiments of a thousand different humanistic philosophies. And I find it hard to see why anyone should feel motivated to such moral ends by a view of existence that (in her own words) boils down to "We are part of the world. We always will be."

If this is the description of God that Symes himself lands upon, then he is as entitled to his worldview as any of his contributors, but since he plays the part throughout of an often-helpful guide and interpreter, I wish he had been more explicit about his own commitments rather than forcing this reviewer to try to read between the lines. In my experience, even when occupying a neutral moderator's chair, it can still be helpful to wear your own faith on your sleeve from time to time.

"

PANTHEISM STRETCHES THE CONCEPT OF GOD SO THIN AND IS SO ALL-ENCOMPASSING THAT IT FAILS TO SAY ANYTHING INTERESTING AT ALL.

"

In conclusion, allow me to wear my faith on my sleeve. Whether someone argues for (or against) God on the grounds of Christianity, atheism, Islam, Hinduism, or something else, I can't improve on the words of C.S. Lewis:

> The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at His glance.…It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. "Look out!" we cry, "it's alive." And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. An "impersonal God"—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. RL

Justin Brierley *is an author, a speaker, and a broadcaster. His book and podcast documentary series* The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God *can be found at justinbrierley.com.*

St. Augustine in His Study by Vittore Carpaccio (1502)

Arguing Like Augustine

With the rise of the nones and the deconstructed, the state of Christian apologetics would appear to be dismal. But must we travel back to the fourth century to find help?

by THOMAS S. KIDD

JOSHUA D. CHATRAW AND Mark D. Allen's *The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness* addresses two questions of major importance to churches and clergy: How do people become Christians? And just as important, how do they stay Christians? In today's rapidly secularizing West, these questions are perhaps more perplexing than they have been for a millennium and a half. Chatraw and Allen suggest that St. Augustine provides a path for the renewal of apologetics in a post-Christian age.

For centuries, most people in Europe and America were simply assumed to be Christians, by virtue of ethnicity and baptism as infants into the church. Few people before the modern era thought in terms of *choosing* to be Christian. Being Christian, they believed, was a default cultural inheritance.

The Protestant Reformation introduced a major aspect of choice in Western religious affiliation (are you Catholic or Protestant?). Then in the 1700s, the evangelical movement began emphasizing an individual believer's choice to receive God's gracious offer of forgiveness. Baptists argued, for example, that baptism was biblically intended not for infants but for believers who had consciously experienced Christian conversion. Still, well into the 20th century there were many places in Europe and the Americas where "Christian" was more of a cultural identity than a chosen individual identity.

Controversies over the Reformation and intellectual trends associated with the "Enlightenment" likewise made skepticism and unbelief live options in ways they had not been since Christianity became

the Roman Empire's official religion in the late fourth century A.D. In the 1700s, outright atheists began to appear in France. The Francophile and onetime American Patriot leader Thomas Paine, a deist, launched a venomous attack on Christianity and the Bible in his polemic *The Age of Reason* (1794).

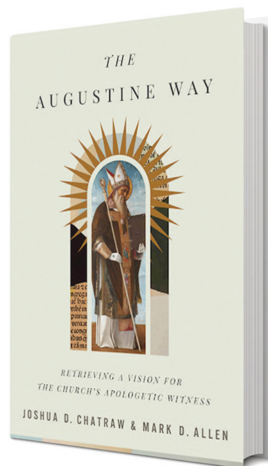
Few people followed Paine's lead into full-blown anti-Christianism, but observers in the West were becoming increasingly aware of arguments against belief. This shifted the range of what was spiritually and intellectually conceivable. Religion slowly changed from a matter of communal identity to an individual decision. This was not always a bad thing for Christianity, because a chosen religion tends to cultivate more zealous followers than a purely inherited one.

Nevertheless, pastors increasingly faced the problem of prospective congregants treating church like a product in the marketplace. A person or family might choose your church and become faithful long-term parishioners. Or they might go to another church. Or they might focus on their kid's sports team. Or they might sleep in. Now religion was up to the "consumer."

In this climate many churches have struggled to know how to persuade people to adopt an enduring Christian faith. This problem has fueled the veritable collapse of mainline denominations in America since the 1960s. Many, such as the The Episcopal Church or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), have long mimicked the progressive posture of elite secular culture. In doing so, they've discovered that if a church offers nothing culturally distinctive, it's likely to become irrelevant. Many conservative denominations in the West are struggling, too, though not to the same extent as the mainline.

As *The Augustine Way* suggests, in recent years Western culture has also produced increasing numbers of "deconstructed" Christians and "nones," or people who say they have left the faith or have no religion in particular. Pollsters and the media have undoubtedly exaggerated these trends, as the alleged decline of Christianity has been "hot" news in America almost since the Pilgrims stepped off the *Mayflower*.

Still, more people than ever will tell pollsters today that they have no religion. For churches, these folks seem virtually unreachable. It's not that they are choosing not to attend; it's that they *never consider* attending. Among segments of European and North American people, nonadherence is now almost as assumed as Christianity was in 1500. Many "nones" find it obnoxious if a Christian neighbor or relative even hints they should consider Christianity's claims, because they see their spiritual identity as wholly private and self-fashioned.



The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness

By Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen

(Baker Academic, 2023)

> "PASTORS INCREASINGLY FACED THE PROBLEM OF PROSPECTIVE CONGREGANTS TREATING CHURCH LIKE A PRODUCT IN THE MARKETPLACE."

Similarly, the "deconstructed" are those who grew up with a Christian inheritance and perhaps went through a devout Christian phase. For example, Chatraw and Allen give significant attention to Rhett McLaughlin, a former staffer and apologist with Campus Crusade for Christ, who is now a prominent YouTuber and nonbeliever. Social media has made it easier than ever for deconstructionists to publicize their journey to nonbelief.

Chatraw and Allen believe that the church today flounders to answer legitimate questions about faith asked by prospective and former Christians such as McLaughlin. The authors are especially doubtful that

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AUGUSTINE WAS PRIMARILY A PASTOR, SO HIS APOLOGETICS WERE FRAMED BY AND IN THE CHURCH.

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Protestant “apologetics ministries,” such as one led by the prominent philosopher William Lane Craig, are up to the challenge. This is not because Craig and other apologists lack sincerity or zeal, but because they hold (according to the authors) a flawed view of why people are Christians. Chatraw and Allen further believe that apologetics ministries are generally too detached from individual congregations to help regular churchgoers persevere.

Contemporary Christian apologists and pastors would profit, the authors suggest, from a deep reading of Augustine. Augustine offers at least two advantages over today’s common brand of apologetics. One is that Augustine’s apologetic situation in late fourth century North Africa, a time when Christian commitment was hardly a cultural norm, is similar to today’s climate of contested faith.

Second, Augustine was primarily a pastor, so his apologetics were framed by and in the church, not in a “parachurch” ministry. Augustine reminds us that apologetics are as much for God’s flock as for outsiders. Chatraw and Allen suggest that the deconstructionist phenomenon might be mitigated if the church had a deeper, well-rounded Augustinian view of apologetics.

At one level, it is hard to argue with *The Augustine Way*. What Christian wouldn’t profit from reading Augustine more? And Chatraw and Allen offer insightful analysis, aided by Augustine, into why people do or do not become Christians. Some of today’s apologetics do seem designed only to persuade the persuaded. If you already are inclined to see the Bible as true and compelling, then you readily receive claims about (for example) how uniquely well-documented Jesus’ life is in the context of the ancient world. If you’re not so inclined, then you’ll be more impressed with arguments against the Bible’s reliability, emphasizing problems regarding the authorship and dating of the Gospels, for example. This tends to leave people talking past each other, if they talk at all.

Rational analysis is certainly part of most people’s decisions to be Christians, but the cognitive aspect is only a part of a complex matrix of spiritual, social, and dispositional factors. Following scholars such as Charles Taylor, the authors suggest that people’s decisions to become Christians relate to the “social imaginary.”

They define the social imaginary as “pre-reflective assumptions that shape our loves, provide the framework for what is believable and what is unbelievable, and contribute to the context for which arguments and evidence are meaningful and which are insubstantial and unconvincing.” The rational apologetic for Christianity is indeed true and powerful. But if a person’s loves, dispositions, and relationships all steer them away from following Jesus, then he/she simply won’t believe. It doesn’t matter how well you state the argument for faith.

The Augustinian model of apologetics acknowledges the value of rational argument, but it focuses as much on relationships and the affections. As Bob Dylan once sang, you’ve “Gotta Serve Somebody.” So the Augustinian apologist asks: Who will you serve? Who will you worship? What or who will you believe in? Most of humanity’s self-crafted answers to these questions have led to meaninglessness and despair. Augustine’s *Confessions* is arguably the greatest extrabiblical narrative of a person’s quest for peace, love, and reconciliation with God and others. Thus, Augustine’s story complements the rational dynamic (is the Resurrection true?) with the affective and relational, conscious of the multifold issues involved in a person’s conversion and endurance.

I’m not as convinced as Chatraw and Allen that Augustine is *especially* valuable because his culture was similar to today’s. One could make a similar argument as *The Augustine Way* about authors such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, or pastor-theologians such as John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards, who all addressed the heart and the mind in their writings. These writers lived in times of much more pervasively Christian culture than we do today, but that did not undercut their ability to make apologetic contributions of enduring value.

I tend to think that Chatraw and Allen are really just saying that the great tradition of Christian theology, in which Augustine holds a special place, has powerful resources for today's church in thinking about how people become Christians and stay Christians. To that I say a hearty "amen."

I'm also not as inclined to dismiss the value of today's apologetics ministries. It's true that those ministries often attract more of a Christian audience than a non-Christian one. Their appeals to reason will not persuade unchurched and de-churched people who are simply disinclined to believe. But there are also some wavering people who *would* consider becoming Christians if they felt like it was intellectually viable to do so.

For instance, I know of one professor's recent conversion to Christian faith that hinged largely on the plausibility of the Resurrection. This may not be a typical case, and even in this convert's experience it's not the "whole story" behind the conversion. But we do need certain Christians to make an evidentiary case for Christianity's truth, even as we realize that people don't respond mechanistically to warrants for belief alone.

The Augustine Way deals little with people who become Christians by responding to the apologetics model that Augustine exemplified. But reading the book spurred me to think about the myriad ways that people do, in fact, become Christians, and the reasons why people stay faithful to God and the church. Some people, like the academic convert mentioned above, experience a mostly rationalist conversion. Yet even the most rationalist convert is typically persuaded in relationship with Christians.

I've also known several fellow church members who became Christians amid ordeals of drug abuse. Their conversions reflected a desperate need to be "saved" by God out of their sin and wrecked lives. Some of these converts are also interested in apologetics, but they wouldn't put rational appeals front and center in their stories. For them, hope for deliverance complemented the appeal of Christian community and assent to the historic truth of Christianity.

Likewise, perseverance in the Christian faith normally happens in the context of loving, supportive churches and families. "Deconstruction" stories, conversely, often feature relationships with professing believers who proved to be hypocritical or un-Christian.

Historic church building for rent in Gainesville, Florida

Photo: Pat Canova / Alamy Stock Photo

Amid the endless scenarios in which people can become Christians, however, we shouldn't forget that God is ultimately behind every instance of conversion and perseverance. As Augustine explained, the city of man is our natural home. He wrote that "love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city."

The great tradition of Christian theology tells us that the earthly city, with its fleshly pride and contempt for God, is the default state of humankind. No person can fundamentally change their disordered affections, or their heart's malign inclinations, without God's power.

No matter how blasé or hostile an unchurched or deconstructed person may be, God's grace can change him or her instantly, as it changed Saul on the road to Damascus. Christians should always be "prepared to make a defense [*apologia*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," as 1 Peter 3 instructs us. But no matter how sophisticated or culturally sensitive that apologetic is, it won't penetrate to the heart unless God moves. That was true for Augustine, and it's also true for lesser apologists like us. RL

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The Crucifixion by Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro, c. 1440)

Who Do You Say That He Is?

The Middle Ages were rife with depictions of Christ and his suffering, so much so that they can seem alien and off-putting in our leisure-obsessed age. A new book shows how we can learn to see what we're missing, in both medieval art and our own lives.

by THOMAS HIBBS

IN THE EARLY 16th century, Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, designed a method of meditation that came to be known as the *Spiritual Exercises*. The meditations involve a "composition of place," a reconstructing in the imagination of a scene from Scripture. So at one point Ignatius writes that the goal "will be here to see with the sight of the imagination, the synagogues, villages and towns through which Christ our Lord preached." The aim is to "see the persons with the sight of the imagination, meditating and contemplating in particular the details" of the scene and then applying the "senses" one by one so that we can immerse ourselves bodily in a particular setting. The next step is to explore the emotions that are aroused and the thoughts that are prompted by an imaginative encounter with the person of Christ and thus invite God's transforming grace into every aspect of one's interior life.

Ignatius' method, which would have an influence on Christian poets such as John Donne, encapsulates and formalizes a way of encountering Christ that runs through the Middle Ages and is particularly evident in high medieval art. For example, in a Fra Angelico painting of the Crucifixion (1420 and now at the Metropolitan Museum), Christ on the cross is at the center of the painting while beneath and around him, forming a sort of semicircle, are various witnesses to the event. What is interesting about those present is their quite varied reactions to Christ, whose suffering is evident from the blood dripping from his upraised hands down his arms and from his side down the cross and into a puddle on the earth below.

The responses vary from indifference, boredom, and curiosity to looks of horror, confusion, and wonder. Each of these responses is a possible reaction of viewers. The painting thus poses for each viewer the question: Who do you say that I am? And how do you respond to the event unfolding in your very midst?

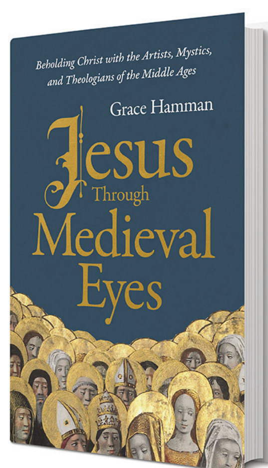
That painting is one of many featured in Grace Hamman's *Jesus Through Medieval Eyes: Beholding Christ with the Artists, Mystics, and Theologians of the Middle Ages*. Weaving together a wide variety of authors and images, the book is beautiful, instructive, and moving. It includes numerous black-and-white and color reproductions of art from the period. The chapters are divided thematically, with each one taking up a particular way of encountering Jesus—as judge or knight, for example. The chapters end with nicely designed suggestions for concrete meditations or practices that might aid the reader in realizing the virtues espoused in the chapter. The book thus quite effectively reproduces for modern readers something like the experience that medieval persons would have had in relation to the texts or artwork.

Anyone advocating a recovery of medieval spirituality is bound to face certain objections to anything "medieval." Hamman faces squarely the disorders and excess of the period. But she follows C.S. Lewis in arguing that one of the advantages of turning to the past is that it can liberate us from the tyranny of the present. No doubt, as Lewis puts it, our predecessors made many mistakes, but they did not make our mistakes. This is not a matter of idealizing the past; as just mentioned, Hamman is blunt about some of the defects. She challenges not only those who want to dismiss the medieval period but also anyone overly prone to celebrate it, particularly those who yearn nostalgically for some imaginative order in the past.

Considering medieval approaches to Jesus in their breadth and particularity will contain surprises for everyone. Understood in this way, the resources of the past provide unexpected gifts to those of us who live at some distance from it. We suffer from an atrophying of the imagination and a contraction in our vocabulary about good and evil, suffering and joy, and sin and redemption. We have lost, as Hamman notes at one point, the richness and "abundant flexibility of the virtues." The medieval past, a past "saturated in beauty and the love of Christ," offers contemporary Christians fresh ways of seeing the person of Christ and vital insights as to how his life can inform our own.

In chapters on "Jesus as Judge" and "Jesus as Knight," Hamman focuses on our need to expand our vocabulary concerning courage and battle. She notes that the images of Christ as judge, foreshadowing the Last Judgment, are sources of both fear and comfort. For the poor, images of members of the upper classes in Hell could be a consolation, underscoring that the inequities of this world will be rectified in God's kingdom. Many of the images of Christ as judge also recall Christ's words about the need to serve "the least of these" from Matthew 25. A 15th-century painting by Petrus Christus, *Christ, the Man of Sorrows*, shows the risen Christ still bearing bloody wounds. As Christ looks directly at the viewer, the fingers of his right hand stretch open the wound at his side, revealing a gaping hole from which blood trickles down his midsection. Because the angels at his side carry the lilies of mercy and the sword of judgment, the painting is also known as *Christ, Savior and Judge*. Hamman notes the way in which justice and mercy are intertwined in the medieval depiction of the final judgment. There must be a reckoning for the cost of Christ's sacrifice. She highlights the eschatological "marriage of true justice and true mercy," which so often "seems impossible" on earth. Christ's knighthood includes weeping and bodily vulnerability. It unites courage and joy. At the end of the chapter, Hamman composes a prayer: "Jesus the Knight, I remember your fortitude as I face battles in my own life. I name these battles....Help me to lay down my human weapons and let you, the God armored in human nature, fight these wars that are so painful."

In the chapter on "Jesus as Mother," Hamman draws from the work of such medieval female spiritual writers as the well-known Julian of Norwich and the lesser-known Marguerite d'Oingt, the latter of whom portrays Christ as a laboring mother desiring to give birth to



Jesus Through Medieval Eyes: Beholding Christ with the Artists, Mystics, and Theologians of the Middle Ages

By Grace Hamman

(Zondervan, 2023)

souls renewed in love. For readers tempted to suppose that such a way of talking about Christ arises from marginal, perhaps even quasi-heretical figures, or at best only female authors, it is important to note that there is a scriptural basis for such imagery. In Matthew 23, Christ speaks of his desire to gather his people as a hen gathers her brood. That passage is the basis for a lengthy meditation on Jesus as mother in a prayer composed by the orthodox theologian Anselm of Canterbury, who writes:

> And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
> Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
> Gathers her chickens under her wings?
> Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
> For if you had not been in labor,
> you could not have born death;
> and if you had not died,
> you would not have brought forth.

Julian of Norwich offers a meditation on God's maternal love in and through our failure: "We need to fail and we need to see our failing." Failure and its recognition allow for indispensable self-knowledge, both of our own weakness or fallibility and of the graciousness of God's love. The failure to acknowledge failure can be rooted in our need to sustain an image of ourselves as complete and invulnerable; it can also be rooted in a false conception of God as someone who would not allow us to fail. Hamman references the lies we love to tell ourselves and the explanations we concoct for things we cannot fully fathom.

One of the many virtues of Hamman's book is its capaciousness, the way it includes texts and art, as well as central and marginal figures. The same book that offers expositions of obscure, at least to us, female authors also includes a lengthy reflection on the most influential theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (in a chapter on "Jesus as Word"). His *Summa Theologiae* remains a source of wisdom—these days not just for Catholics but for many Protestants as well. Yet the *Summa*, constructed according to the disputed-question model prominent in the nascent universities of the 13th century, is hardly accessible to contemporary readers. Hamman hits upon precisely the elements in Aquinas' method that are nevertheless most needed in today's churches. As she puts it, Aquinas provides contemporary Christians with a "Jesus big enough for questions." At a time when we are tempted to run quickly to answers, which we embrace with unyielding certitude and often deploy as weapons against our

"FAILURE AND ITS RECOGNITION ALLOW FOR INDISPENSABLE SELF-KNOWLEDGE."

ideological opponents, Hamman wants us to reflect on "what comes before answers"—namely, questions and objections. After the objections, Aquinas then offers a set of clarifications, distinctions, and arguments designed to resolve the questions. Finally, he returns to the objections and supplies responses to each.

Hamman makes a nice point about Aquinas' habit of citing numerous other Christian authors: it underscores the fundamentally social nature of human inquiry—we "learn together." While she highlights the importance of communal inquiry within the Church, we might also add that Aquinas has a generous attitude toward not only other Catholics but also Jews, Muslims, and pagans.

While Hamman devotes a specific chapter to the "Wounded God," the theme of Jesus' human suffering permeates the book, as it does medieval piety. Hamman admits that there is a risk in giving inordinate attention to suffering and that medieval approaches sometimes make her uneasy. The focus can shift to a quantification of suffering and can direct our attention away from God to ourselves. But for the writers and artists to whom Hamman draws our attention, the acceptance of suffering in response to our sins and to Christ's own suffering is infused with hope and joy. This is precisely the section of the book in which Hamman discusses Fra Angelico's *Crucifixion* with its varied onlookers. Her suggestions to her readers about how to engage this painting apply to every section of the book: "What stands out? How do you feel, what do you think, what strikes you as you stand under the cross just like Fra Angelico's observers?" Her exposition here captures what is both instructive and moving about *Jesus Through Medieval Eyes*, a book that will repay slow, meditative, and repetitive reading. RL

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The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1613)

God the Creator and Creation

God is wholly Other. And yet his Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. How do we reconcile divine transcendence and God's ongoing activity within the creation itself? One popular theologian challenges the God of the philosophers.

by JORDAN J. BALLOR

THE CHALLENGE OF reconciling God's transcendence and immanence is all too familiar to seminarians as well as to anyone who has ever participated in a group Bible study. I distinctly remember in my own early theological studies grappling with seemingly antithetical truths. Scripture seems to clearly teach God's radical relationship to creation, such that, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, we confess belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary." God the Son took on flesh, becoming human with all that entails. But the Bible also clearly teaches God's radical difference from all of creation. Over and over we encounter God's unique self-identification, such as appears in Isaiah 46:9: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" (ESV). When theologians wax most emphatically on this characteristic, the likelihood of hearing God described as "wholly other" rises significantly.

I decided fairly early on—perhaps first on instinct and only later confirmed in more advanced study in courses on Jonathan Edwards and panentheism—that the best, if not the only orthodox, way of resolving the dilemma was to affirm both radical transcendence as well as immanence. In fact, the latter is made possible and depends entirely on the former. A kind of zero-sum dynamic between transcendence and immanence must be avoided if we are to avoid falling into heterodoxy and error.

Peter J. Leithart's *Creator: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1* is a very curious foray into the doctrine of God. One of Leithart's clear intentions

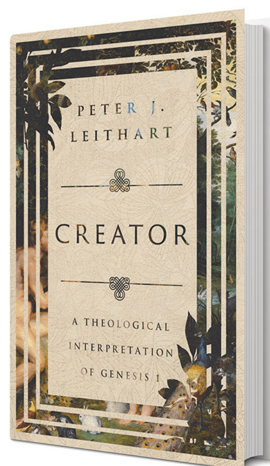
is to avoid just this kind of error: "*Because* God is transcendent, unbounded by spatial and temporal limits, he is immanent, present, and active in every space and time. His immanence in every space and time implies, in turn, his transcendence of spatial and temporal limits." So far, so good.

But Leithart is primarily concerned with presenting God as the Bible presents him, attempting to work thoroughly from scripture first without importing alien philosophical categories or presuppositions. Whether Leithart succeeds in this is ultimately up for debate, or at least for further clarification, as this volume is the first in a projected trilogy. Given Leithart's own creational hermeneutic, it may well be that we cannot fully understand this first volume until his exploration into the doctrine of God finds fulfillment at the end of volume 3. So until then, our considerations and conclusions must be necessarily provisional. Nevertheless, some significant things can be learned about both Leithart's approach and his (provisional) conclusions, which should lead those brave enough to follow along through two more volumes to tread cautiously.

One of the conclusions I reached in my own ruminations about divine transcendence and immanence (and related issues concerning God's nature and the creator/creature distinction) was that God's identity as creator (understood as referring to a world-order outside of God) could not be primary. Otherwise, I reasoned, creation would be in some sense metaphysically necessary, and then something like pantheism or panentheism would be unavoidable. To protect God's radical freedom and transcendence, God's identity as creator must in some way be understood as relative, secondary, or conditional. Even as Leithart affirms both the radical transcendence and immanence of God, however, his hermeneutical approach leads him to take his point of departure in the fundamental identification of God as creator. Contra metaphysically freighted classical theistic concerns about orthodoxy, Leithart instead affirms "the Bible and the creed ('I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth') as a more suitable and stable grammar, to which all other conceptualities must be drastically subordinated."

Leithart's vehemence in a biblical and creedal starting point, denuded of outside intrusions, explains both his embrace of a fundamentalist identity as well as his deconstructive approach in this book. A reader might be forgiven for expecting a theological exposition of Genesis 1 to start at the very beginning of the biblical text (which, along with Maria from *The Sound of Music*, we are assured is a very good place to start). Alas, the first half of the book is aimed at a thoroughgoing analysis of the negative impact of Greek philosophy (Hellenization) on Christian theology. Rather than starting with Genesis 1, then, Leithart is concerned to dissect Greek creation accounts, from pre-Socratics like Heraclitus to Plato's *Timaeus*. While interesting, this learned discourse does not seem to quite accomplish what Leithart desires. For one thing, the biblical account in Genesis predates these philosophical explorations, which is one reason why the early apologists championed the idea of *prisca theologia* as an explanatory device. The idea was that there was so much that was obviously true (albeit not entirely true and riddled with errors) in Greek philosophy that these writers must have encountered special revelation as recorded by Moses and integrated these insights into their pagan reflections. Strangely enough, Leithart's theological interpretation of scripture does not even begin at the beginning, either textually or historically.

Rather, Leithart's purpose in this first half of the book is polemical. From Augustine to Aquinas (and beyond to their many contemporary devotees), Greek dualisms and philosophical commitments have corrupted Christian theology. This is an old story, of course, but Leithart presents it in a learned and engaging enough way. He is not entirely dismissive of Augustine and Aquinas but instead critical of them where their theologies are deemed incomplete or not consistent enough. Aquinas, for instance, is mostly right but fails to follow the truth of his own basic insight all the way. A major problem for Aquinas is



Creator: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1

By Peter J. Leithart

(IVP Academic, 2023)

that he starts with God's oneness and unity when he should have started with the Trinity. God's threeness is therefore a key marker of a biblical as opposed to a Hellenized theological method.

It might be countered that scripture itself starts with God's oneness, and indeed, many Jews and Christians have asserted just such a claim: the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 declares, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." But this can only be rightly understood, insists Leithart, by way of Paul's revision of "this central Jewish confession" in 1 Corinthians 8:6: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." This, along with a Trinitarian interpretation of *Elohim* in Genesis 1, including some fascinating linguistic arithmetic, allows Leithart to argue not only that creation is ontologically trinitarian from the beginning, so too is the scriptural witness concerning creation.

Saint Thomas Aquinas by Luis Muñoz Lafuente (1795)

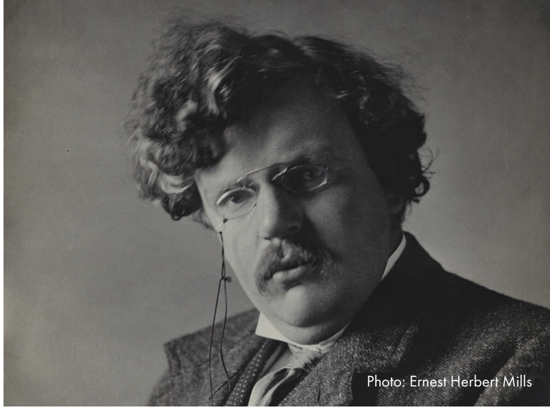
Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

> **"GOD'S THREENESS IS THEREFORE A KEY MARKER OF A BIBLICAL AS OPPOSED TO A HELLENIZED THEOLOGICAL METHOD."**

The picture of God that emerges is that of a triune creator: the Speaking God, the Spoken God, and the Spirit God. Leithart is keen to revise the classical depiction of the creator/creature relationship that can sometimes be construed as creating an independent and autonomous space for created things to persist. Nothing exists apart from the ongoing and active will of God, asserts Leithart, and this is radically true. "Today's sunrise, your rising, your heartbeat and your breath and the incalculable biochemical interactions that maintain your life and the life of all things," writes Leithart, "all of it, at every moment, is the product of the word of the creator." Despite his attempts to validate time and history in his account of creation, however, this claim of radical ontic as well as historical contingency raises doubts about the validity of Leithart's account of divine and created historicity.

At various points, Leithart celebrates his approach as "childish," and here he seems not only to be ready to parry and counterattack advocates of various kinds of divine accommodation but also to be channeling the enthusiasm of G.K. Chesterton. In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton makes this remarkable observation:

> Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do



G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936)

> it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

Leithart's God is a "young" God in this sense, full of vital energy, dynamism, life.

As noted earlier, Leithart seems to relish the role of provocateur fundamentalist. Indeed, he defends a view of creation in Genesis 1 as consisting of six literal 24-hour days. And why not? What does it matter what philosophers or human reason says when the Bible teaches something clearly?

It would have been fascinating to see Leithart's engagement with other philosophers and scholastics beyond Aquinas. There is precious little of that, which is not to say that the book is not erudite, but there are gaps in the literature and figures with which he does engage. Those who are used are deployed strategically but, in my view, idiosyncratically.

Leithart's commitment to a straightforward literalistic (not to say literal or literary) reading is most evident in his approach to Genesis 1 and 2. Essentially, Genesis 1 provides a kind of trinitarian theological rhythm that encompasses all of creation. Genesis 2, by contrast, is a particular account of a specific day of creation, zooming in on day six of Genesis 1. Other attempts to harmonize the first two chapters place the events of chapter 2 in the context of day three. But as Leithart claims, "The field shrubs (*siach*) and herbs (*'eseb*) that have not yet sprouted in Genesis 2:5 are not the same as the grasses and fruit trees of day three." Therefore, since Genesis 2 relates to the creation of human beings, it must refer to day six. The persuasiveness of this claim hangs on the larger coherence of his characterization of Genesis 1 itself.

"LEITHART'S ANTIPATHY FOR PHILOSOPHY IS NOT AS CONSISTENT OR PURE AS IT MAY SEEM."

Leithart's antipathy for philosophy is not as consistent or pure as it may seem or as he might desire. In seeking to avoid the static, transcendent, remote god of the Greek philosophers and Hellenized Christian theology, Leithart seems to have flirted a bit too closely perhaps with the immanent, interdependent god of some later philosophers. He decries pantheism and is right not only to do so but to claim that he does so. But does he avoid the more sophisticated and more tempting varieties of panentheism? Perhaps not. As he puts it in his conclusion: "Within [God's] life there is a whence and a whither, and so he can and does enclose created time, making it his time with us. He is in creation, even as creation exists in him." This is not necessarily definitive of panentheism, but it is at the very least suggestive.

It may well be that beginning with either God's unity or the Trinity brings inevitable dangers. Leithart's approach foregrounds the latter and gets as far as he can on that basis to affirm divine unity, simplicity, and other traditional attributes. "We cannot know any God but the creator because the only God who *is* is the God who has created," concludes Leithart. Some readers may be convinced by the courage of this conviction. Others will sagely judge it safer to side with Augustine, Aquinas, and Herman Bavinck rather than Peter Leithart. RL

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Photo: Bohdan Bevz/ iStock

Christian: Know Thyself

Are we all called to be philosophers and theologians? One philosopher thinks so. But who has the time?

by MICHAEL J. LYNCH

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND ministers often make the claim that all human beings are theologians—that is, they have a theology; the only question is whether they are good theologians (or have a good theology). Ross Inman, a philosopher at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes a similar argument in his *Christian Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Inman argues that all human beings are designed for philosophical reflection. As Inman says, "We don't choose our natural appetite to make sense of it all—to philosophize."

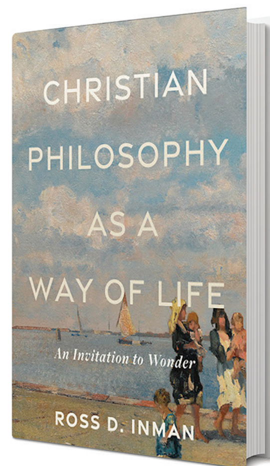
Such a position is quite in keeping with Aristotle's anthropology. Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know." Accordingly, Inman's book is designed to encourage that natural appetite and to give an apologetic for why it ought to be encouraged. The title of Inman's book may give the impression that it is focused on philosophy, but it might be better described as a defense of the necessity and desirability of what the French Dominican A.G. Sertillanges called the intellectual life. Indeed, although Inman's work might justly be said to handle areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, at least at a popular level, its real concern is to defend our human rationality and its usefulness for human flourishing. The good life for Inman is one that self-consciously meditates on, as Inman puts it, the "true meaning and purpose of all created things in Christ."

To that end (and Inman focuses a lot on teleology), Inman lays out what he contends is the Christian philosophical way of life. First, this requires that a person commit himself to the truth of the Christian faith, which involves identifying what is real, what the good

life is, and how one ought to attain such a life. A distinctively *Christian* philosophical way of life entails that these answers be guided by Holy Scripture.

Second, Inman's vision of such a life means that a Christian will center his life in this existential roadmap, as he calls it. Living in view of such reality leads Inman to his third condition: practicing various habits that inculcate reality and respond to it. More specifically, the Christian, viewing himself as he really is, will recognize his own finitude—recognizing what Inman calls his existential limitations—and will seek God's grace to empower him to live a life pleasing to God. Just as a weightlifter gets in the habit of eating healthy and regularly lifting weights, so the Christian living this philosophical life is one who frequently meditates on God and his relationship with God's world. He will memorize and meditate on God's word. He will foster Christian friendships explicitly focused on discussing and delighting in what is truly good, true, and beautiful.

Inman leans heavily on the Christian philosophical tradition. There is a whole section dedicated to a portion of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and numerous references to Augustine as well as a host of other classic Christian philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas and Josef Pieper. At one point, while reading his apologetic for slowing down and dedicating time to think, wonder, and meditate on God and the rest of reality in a world that increasingly finds such time as wasteful, I could not help but think of C.S. Lewis' famous essay "Learning in Wartime," which deftly navigates this dilemma. How



Christian Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Invitation to Wonder

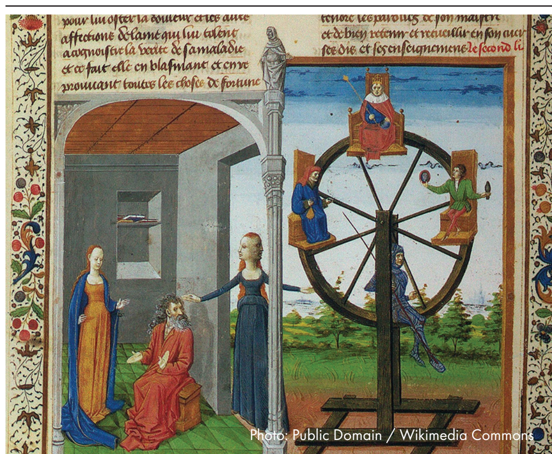
By Ross D. Inman

(Baker, 2023)

can you spend time thinking about philosophy while your friends are dying in the trenches? Sure enough, Inman quickly cited this very article. Notably, however, Inman does not strike the exact note Lewis does—and this leads to an area of potential criticism.

Lewis, in his defense of learning during wartime (which could be substituted for any number of problems, as Inman himself notes, such as disease or famine), asserts that such philosophical inquiry is the very means by which we often are able to handle the various difficulties and distresses of life. Here Inman agrees with Lewis, only to ignore his other observation, the less politically safe one. Lewis, unlike Inman, does not see the philosophical life as a calling everyone has. The intellectual life is simultaneously a vocation unique to some while also being no better than any other vocation. Lewis argued that the reason some ought to study literature, philosophy, or chemistry during wartime is because they are simply gifted to do this. Put negatively, Lewis denied that all people should learn during wartime; some should indeed fight for one's country. Notwithstanding, in the same

A page of a medieval French translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (15th century)



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> **"C. S. LEWIS MADE IT CLEAR THAT A VOCATION TO LEARN IS IN NO WAY A SUPERIOR CALLING."**

breath Lewis made it clear that a vocation to learn is in no way a superior calling. Following Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Lewis insisted that: "The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly 'as to the Lord.'"

In contrast, Inman seems to see the philosophical life—the intellectual life—as a higher calling, but then universalizes it. He repeatedly argues that "if humans are meaning-seeking animals by nature, then philosophical activity should be thought of not as an optional aid to a human life well-lived but rather as an essential ingredient to the distinctly human life well-lived." If all Inman means is that we cannot help but be human, and thus if all people intend to live a truly human life, then all should prioritize thinking rationally rather than irrationally, delighting in truly aesthetically pleasing things rather than indulging in sensualistic pleasures, then there should be little controversy. But the only solitude a mother of five or a CEO of a Fortune 500 company might be able to find is when he or she prays before going to bed. What we should emphasize, as Lewis and Luther perceived, is that service to God may not be in a life of meditation, solitude, and self-examination, but in a calling as a mother or a CEO. The Greeks had a word for leisure, σχολή, from which we get the English word *school*. This leisure was often seen as the prerequisite for what Inman wants for the philosophical life. It simply is not the case that everyone's vocation permits the sort of leisure assumed in Inman's book.

One might get the false impression that Inman's work, given its optimistic, egalitarian outlook on living the Christian philosophical life, is not worth taking seriously. This would be a mistake. There are far too many Christians—frankly, far too many human beings—who would do well to use their time in precisely the way Inman lays out. Spending hours upon hours watching Netflix or your favorite sports team is obviously not the good life, the truly satisfying one God has offered in Christ. It is one thing to spend every waking hour of the workweek raising your children in the Lord or building your business for the common good of a given society; it is another altogether to spend much of that time scrolling through programs on your smart TV. Leisure, classically and philosophically understood, was the freedom for education, the freedom for voluntary service, the freedom for

THE ONLY SOLITUDE A MOTHER OF FIVE MIGHT BE ABLE TO FIND IS WHEN SHE PRAYS BEFORE GOING TO BED.

wonder. While it is questionable whether all people are provided such leisure by their calling, the simple fact is that most in American society do not have jobs and other obligations that prohibit significant time for leisure—to contemplate, read, pray, and commune with godly friends.

In short, Inman is right to insist that, if given such leisure, it ought not be squandered, but instead redeemed. It is worth observing that, in the Old Testament, God gave one day a week for precisely this aim: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God." Most Christians throughout church history have seen this commandment as, at least, analogous to the Christian Lord's Day, Sunday. Inman's call to a focused life of meditation upon God and creation is matched by God's granting of a day of rest for his people under the New Covenant.

Inman's defense of the Christian philosophical way of life is a healthy antidote to the various ills of our society, whether expressive individualism, depression, or sensuality, all of which Inman addresses. Quibbles aside, Inman has provided a popular yet thorough Christian apologetic for the life of the mind and an invitation to wonder, as his subtitle puts it. One can only hope that Inman's little book will be an instrument for eroding the superficiality of much of evangelicalism and, more generally, of our peculiar age. RL

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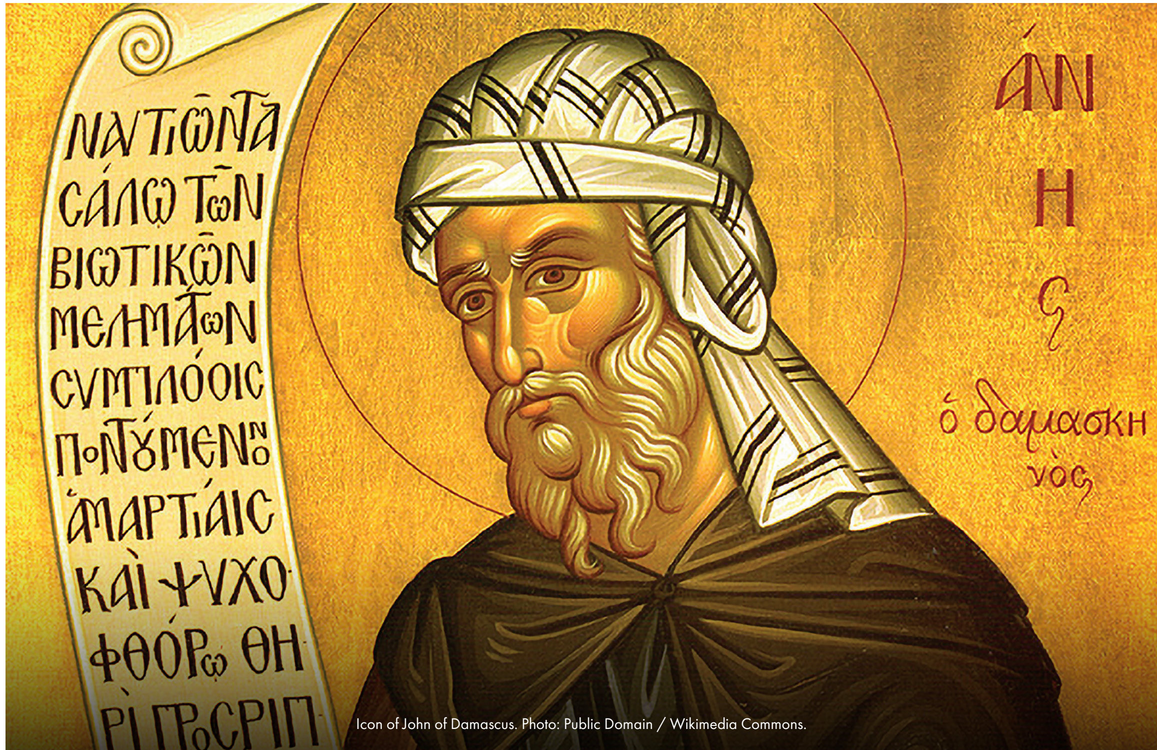


Icon of John of Damascus. Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons.

Calming the Storm of Images

Church history is filled with controversies and scandals, few more demoralizing than the fight over images in worship. Is it possible there was merit to the arguments of both sides—the iconoclasts and the iconodules? A new book tries to make the case.

by **DYLAN PAHMAN**

I GREW UP IN AN aniconic, evangelical church. "Iconoclastic" would be inaccurate, because to my knowledge no one there had literally ever smashed any sacred images ("iconoclast" comes from *eikon*, meaning "image," and *klastes*, meaning "smasher"). They just didn't have any and didn't want any.

Well, that's not entirely true. Every Christmas, the church put on a spectacular musical pageant, including costumed actors portraying the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. During Holy Week (they didn't call it that), they staged a performance of the life of Christ, again visually portraying our Lord. In Sunday school, we had picture books of Bible stories. And, of course, we had felt-board Jesus.

The goal of all these visual aids was evangelism, whether of visitors or children in Sunday school. No doubt people would have been upset if Christ or the Mother of God (which they wouldn't call her) had broken character. So, too, teachers would have sternly corrected a child who decided to scribble in the Bible storybooks or portray a comical scene involving flannel Jesus. Rightly so. Yet some of these same people also taught me that they were better than Roman Catholics, who weren't real Christians because they "worshipped idols" of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints.

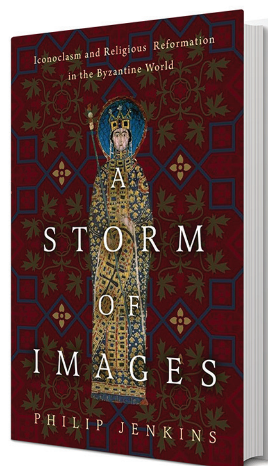
As a teenager, I began to feel out of place in my childhood church. This had mostly to do with the

youth-group-as-social-club approach to teenage catechesis, which taught me nothing. I was full of questions, and no one had any answers for me. I also remember having some natural talent for visual art, drawing in particular. I never developed as an artist—my mother couldn't afford lessons—but it still bothered me that there was no place for my God-given talent in my home church. Then in college, I stayed out too late on Saturday nights and stopped going altogether.

Years later, I came back to church and started studying Bible and theology at Kuyper College, in the course of which I realized: 1) I should care a lot more about the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, since it is the only statement of faith technically every Christian claims to believe; and 2) that extra Latin word (*filioque*) added centuries later didn't fit into the theology of the Greek Fathers, who wrote the creed in the first place. I also discovered the ascetic tradition of the ancient Church, which had near-scientifically studied exactly how best to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). These intellectual and spiritual currents converged and swept me, like many others, toward the Orthodox Church.

But though I might assent to Orthodox dogma and benefit from asceticism, one barrier remained: all those icons! In Orthodox churches, there is a literal barrier of icons—the iconostasis—at the front of the nave. Icons are everywhere, and they aren't just there to look at: worshippers make the sign of the cross before them, kiss them, face them when they pray, and on occasion process with them behind the priest and the cross. Some are even associated with miracles. I had a lot of baggage from my upbringing that made these practices off-putting. Couldn't someone agree to everything else but just skip all the weird icon stuff? The Orthodox Church answered with a clear "no" in every expression of its piety. I couldn't become Orthodox unless I could get beyond my hesitancy toward icons. Thankfully, by this time I knew exactly who to consult to determine if this could be for me: St. John of Damascus.

> "I COULDN'T BECOME ORTHODOX UNLESS I COULD GET BEYOND MY HESITANCY TOWARD ICONS."



A Storm of Images: Iconoclasm and Religious Reformation in the Byzantine World
By Philip Jenkins
(Baylor University Press, 2023)

Reading the Cappadocian Fathers had been my first push in the direction of the Orthodox Church. If I were to transform my thinking on icons, I would have to read the foremost defender of icon veneration during the eighth and ninth centuries' Iconoclastic Controversy, that "storm of images" Philip Jenkins refers to in the title of his new book, *A Storm of Images: Iconoclasm and Religious Reformation in the Byzantine World*. If the Damascene didn't convince me, I would have to become…I didn't know. Maybe *Anglican* or something.

Suffice it to say, I was convinced and did become Orthodox, taking St. John of Damascus as my patron saint. I relay all this backstory to note that I am a biased reader of *A Storm of Images*. Jenkins opens his book with a provocative, both-sides perspective: "In reality, both pro- and anti-image militants were innovators, seeking new forms of worship and trying as best they could to situate them within both scriptural and historical Christian tradition." He correctly pushes hard against one-sided, 19th- and 20th-century summaries of iconoclasts as "not Philistines but conservatives wanting their religion the old way," to quote Henry Chadwick. But in order to portray iconoclasts and iconodules (supporters of icons) on *equal* footing, I expected Jenkins to expose either unknown treachery on the part of the iconodules or uncredited

virtue of the iconoclasts. While he does show how history is messy, the evils of iconoclasm still heavily outweigh Orthodoxy. Put simply, the facts of history Jenkins so carefully uncovers undermine the book's stated thesis that both sides made defensible claims.

Jenkins begins by noting how the iconoclastic movement seems to have begun among Christians in Muslim-controlled Syria in the early 720s, mostly under duress, and then only briefly. With the ascent of Leo the Isaurian, a successful general, to the throne of Constantinople, however, iconoclasm became the official policy of New Rome. Leo deposed the Orthodox patriarch Germanos. Everything proceeded in largely top-down fashion, under state pressure.

Leo's successor, Constantine V, continued his policies and branched out to suppress monasticism as well. Jenkins describes Constantine's "near pathological hatred of monks," who were often outspoken iconodules, by detailing how he would theatrically humiliate, torture, and murder them in the Hippodrome before crowds who, Jenkins suggests, may have been compelled to attend as well. Of course, Orthodox historians of this period do not bother with objectivity, and describe the emperor in the most devilish terms, even comparing him to pagan emperors who martyred so many Christians of the early Church. Yet, while perhaps calling him "dung-named" (Copronymos) is a little childish, the comparison to Diocletian and other anti-Christian tyrants seems quite apt to me. Sure, Constantine also claimed to be a Christian, but he still murdered Christians for show. The analogy fits.

Constantine V's successor, Empress Irene, acting as regent for her minor son, Constantine VI, reversed the iconoclast policy of the previous 50 years, calling the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787. Following on Jenkins' storm analogy, we could call the roughly 20 years of her reign the eye of the storm, the brief calm before havoc continued. Irene's hold on power was fragile, and in order to survive the infamous Byzantine intrigue, she fell into it as well, making a habit of blinding and exiling—but not outright murdering—her rivals, including her own son, who, Jenkins notes, nevertheless did die from his wounds. In her defense, her son had finally come of age and was at the center of a plotted coup, but even the chronicler Theophanes, who otherwise paints Irene as a saint, recoiled at this. As Judith Herrin summarizes, Theophanes "notes that the sky was darkened for seventeen days…which was interpreted as a condemnation of the blinding. And he concludes, 'In this way, his mother Irene acceded to power.'" If once considered a saint, she's absent from the Menaion (an important liturgical guidebook) and no longer venerated today.

After Irene, a series of iconoclastic emperors ruled for another generation, continuing the conflict in all its inhuman treachery, including monks and other dissenters once again being tortured, branded, exiled, whipped to death, and beheaded. Only upon the death of Emperor Theophilos in 842 and the ascent of Empress St. Theodora did Byzantium finally obtain a permanent calm from the "storm of images."

The mercy seat as depicted in the 1890 Holman Bible

Photo: Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

Jenkins goes on to describe what can be reconstructed of the iconoclasts' theology: they claimed that the making and veneration of icons violated the Second Commandment. "Constantine [V] repeatedly argues that God is *aperigraphon*, uncircumscribed, elevating the concept to the status of the famous Chalcedonian 'withouts.'" Accordingly, the "final horos" of the iconoclastic council in Hieria asserted that "the unlawful art of painting living creatures blaspheme[s] the fundamental doctrine of our salvation—namely the incarnation of Christ." The iconoclasts justified this last claim by insisting that icons could be justified only if one either divided or conflated the divine and human natures of Christ.

Suffice it to say, these points do not hold up against a close reading of scripture or church history, and St. John of Damascus, free to write from Muslim-controlled Syria, ably answered each point in the 720s and '30s in his three treatises. He notes that the law of Moses commands the making of all sorts of images, even that they should be used in worship and

> **EVERY ICON IS A DECLARATION OF THE INCARNATION OF THE UNCIRCUMSCRIBABLE GOD.**

honored, though not themselves worshiped. Graven images of cherubim flanked the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Icons of angels adorned the curtain separating the holy place from the most holy place in the Tabernacle (Exodus 26:31–34).

Moreover, God gave a pertinent justification for why no image of him could be created: "Take careful heed to yourselves, *for you saw no form* when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb…lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure" (Deuteronomy 4:15–16, emphasis added). But for Christians, the story does not end on Mount Horeb. Through the Incarnation, the divine "Logos of Life" is "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, *which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled*" (1 John 1:1, emphasis added). "When He who is a pure spirit," wrote the Damascene, "without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it."

Every icon, then, is a declaration of the Incarnation of the uncircumscribable God. As for the objection that one must either divide or conflate Christ's two natures, the same could be said of the (sub-)natures of body and soul. Yet no one claims that a painting of a person is only a painting of a body. It is a painting of all that is visible of a *person*, and through the body we even see the soul, without dividing or confusing them. This same reasoning underlay early Christians' defense of the Resurrection: when a person dies, we do not simply say that a body died. As people are body-soul unities, death is unnatural. It would be unfitting for God not to restore the union of body and soul in the general resurrection. So, too, defenders of the popular title Theotokos ("birth-giver of God") in the fifth century claimed that as a woman does not give birth only to the body of a man, but to the whole person, so too in the Incarnation the Virgin Mary became the Mother of God—not that the Son didn't exist as divine from all eternity, but that she bore God Incarnate through his assumed humanity, now inseparable and unconfused with his divinity.

To be fair, Jenkins is right to point out some of the inauthentic sources in church history that the Damascene references (forgeries were common in antiquity). Nevertheless, Jenkins himself traces a real history of image-making back to the early Church (even early synagogues) and devotional veneration for "at least" more than a century before iconoclasm. I would quibble with one assessment, however. Jenkins criticizes St. John of Damascus for using St. Basil's famous phrase that "the honor paid the image passes on to the original," because St. Basil was talking about how the Son is the perfect image of the Father—a defense of Trinitarian theology, not of icons. But St. Basil's point rests on the nature of *images* as such. Indeed, the Damascene is as much concerned with the nature of all images as he is with any sacred subcategory. Thus, as Jenkins observes, he and other iconodules note how the image of the emperor was proliferated and honored. If the image of an iconoclastic emperor deserved to be made and honored, how much more so Christ, the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and his Mother and friends (the saints)?

Ultimately, Jenkins' book succeeds as history but fails to support his "both-sides" thesis. I cannot imagine even a Calvinist or other modern, aniconic Christian reading it and thinking, "I'm glad my theology is associated with these iconoclasts instead of the people they wantonly murdered." Indeed, I would even suspect that in practice they are less aniconic than they confess. Flannel Jesus might not be much of an icon, but more than a few children have been saved through him. Shouldn't every Christian "receive the kingdom of God as a little child" (Luke 18:17)? The Seventh Ecumenical Council thought so, and *A Storm of Images* only reinforced that conviction for me. RL

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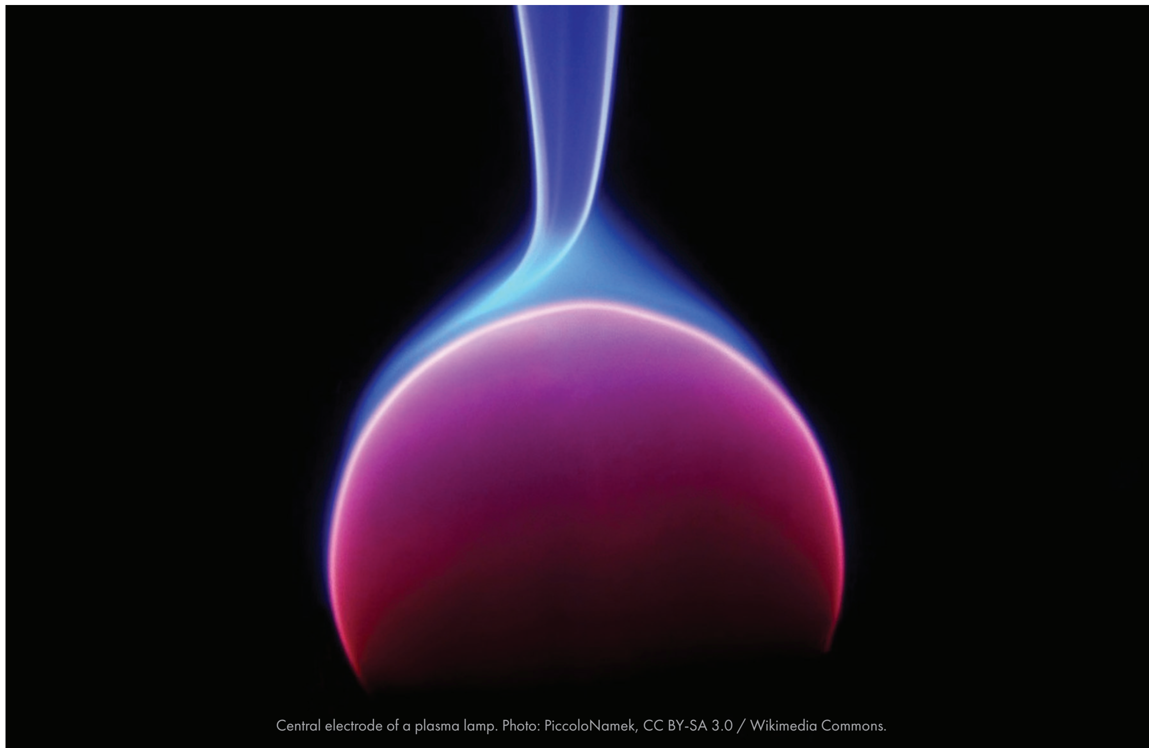


Central electrode of a plasma lamp. Photo: PiccoloNamek, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons.

An Energetic Theory for the Future of Humanity

Is what it means to be human easily summed up in a theory? How about humanity's evolutionary destiny? A new book illustrates the new thinking and tries to tie it all together with four laws.

by BRIAN PADDEN

READY FOR AN INTELLECTUAL adventure full of beautiful analysis both qualitative and quantitative, variety in topics, and critical insights for our time as well as the future? In Michael Muthukrishna's *A Theory of Everyone*, you've come to the right place—at least to a certain extent. Muthukrishna lays down his four Laws of Life in this work, which allow us to see the true nature of the forces in charge of life and to navigate, possibly, the whole future of humanity. All this is written in a way that is understandable to the amateur, lively, entertaining, and logical.

Muthukrishna wants to tell us (part 1) Who We Are and How We Got Here, and (part 2) Where We're Going: in short, what human beings are and recommendations for our future. Both parts are interesting and audacious, with plenty of examples. The analysis given is rich in mathematical and conceptual thinking within many different disciplines, with occasional reliance—really just touchpoints or quick shout-outs—on classical (usually Western) thought.

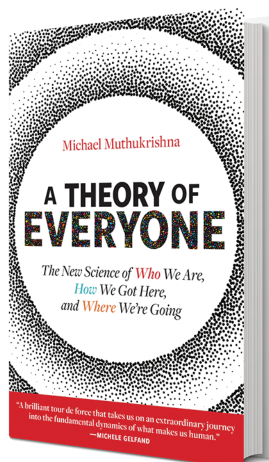
Muthukrishna's four Laws of Life are (in my best paraphrase) as follows. First, the Law of Energy: life requires energy to run, and so getting more energy is centrally important to the success of life. Second and Third, the Laws of Innovation and Cooperation: life will innovate the ways it both acquires and uses

energy, and it will cooperate for the same purposes. Fourth and finally, the Law of Evolution: things that do not grow get crowded out, so regardless of what we think might work, the "system" "selects" that which does in fact work. With this bold stroke of the pen, Muthukrishna claims to have given us the keys to the kingdom of knowledge regarding what it means to be human and to live as one. This is *A Theory of Everyone*.

After giving the laws, the book proceeds to first describe evolutionary history, starting in the presumptive earliest stages of life, then a bit of human history, and then human nature in general, hitting us with exciting examples throughout. If you liked *Freakonomics*, then you will love this. Not everybody can write a mathematical or conceptually rigorous book complete with tight logical connections that simply revels in the love of its subject matter, but Muthukrishna can and did.

For example, he regales us with Cunningham's Law (which posits that, since many on the internet *love* to correct others, you can be assured of a correct answer by posting the *wrong* answer), then apprises us of Norway's success setting up an investment fund with its oil money, eventually gaining 1.5% of the entire stock market. He makes a case that an increase in cesarean sections could change human brain sizes because they had previously been limited by the size of the birth canal. The author shares an appreciation for the elderly as critical fonts of knowledge that we can't live without in times that have stayed similar for decades, although such wisdom is in jeopardy when times are rapidly changing.

The book explores as perhaps its most marquee idea the *cultural brain hypothesis*: human beings *as a species* rely on handed-down culture even more than individuals' gray matter for our collective ability to innovate and function. We are also treated to Uber Europe's 5S rules—which includes the "two-pizza rule," limiting the number of people one should invite to a meeting by the amount of food the group may eat, showing a general limit on cooperation. He argues that copying others is a good thing (again, like so many of his points, illustrated by several accurate, interesting examples), puncturing a hole in our individualistic American sensibilities. He gets at fundamental questions of cultural groups by exploring the forces at work in discussing things like loyalty.



A Theory of Everyone: The New Science of Who We Are, How We Got Here, and Where We're Going
By Michael Muthukrishna
(MIT Press, 2023)

Such insights can deepen our understanding of humanity, especially why we do the things we do. In a couple of important ways, however, the book falls short. The author compares his central idea to the water fish swim in: that just as water is ubiquitously crucial for fish, perhaps without their realizing it exists because of its very ubiquity, the truth of his theory is the crux of humans' lives (perhaps without *our* understanding it). Given this declared ultimate status, one thing puzzled me: in introducing his four laws, our author makes absolutely no attempt to show that they are necessary or sufficient, nor does he compare them to competing theories. We might ask, What of other essential parts of life beyond energy?

Energy simply plays too central of a role here. Sure, scales of cooperation in hunter-gatherer societies might contain an energy-driven dynamic in which banding together more people to hunt large game like a stag makes sense—the stag is worth a lot more energy than a rabbit. Likewise, the availability of energy (through fossil fuels) has been central to the great increase in many measures of human well-being since around year 1700. However, it would take a great feat to show the central role of energy for literature or fashion or entertainment.

I wonder if Muthukrishna unfairly narrows the human good to its materialistic component, for which energy may be a fairly good specification. We humans pursue many things, and they are called *the good*; but they comprise more than energy.

Let's look at just one example. His section on romantic relations has a lot of analysis on cooperation, incentive structures, and alternatives to monogamous marriage. In the end, it seems that monogamous marriage in the data displays overwhelming dominance, but what we get is an uncertain result: "Monogamy as a norm…is an evolutionary mystery."

Is this a case in which life in fact disobeys his theory and goes against economic or energy utility?

Regarding non-energy goods, it may be that they are pursued wittingly or unwittingly for the sake of energy, or that the pursuit of energy matters for whether you survive evolutionarily, so therefore energy always wins out.

Muthukrishna goes on to make a number of recommendations (or predictions?), one of which is Start-Up Cities, in which a model of city-scale governance in one place is seeded into a new place. Another is Programmable Politics, in which, it seems, we can choose in online transactions the universe of laws in which our transaction is meant to take place. There are recommendations on taxes, social media, and education. These are interesting suggestions, though it is simply hard to predict the future.

In all this, Muthukrishna has goals for us driven by ideals. He wants to set us up for truth in media, trust in our scientists, less acrimony in politics, and more effective learning. This is why when reading the book, one is hardly left cold: there seems to be no problem with humans pursuing spiritual and other goods besides energy in Muthukrishna's future work, only this is not formally in the theory.

Once again, the book caused me great enjoyment and gave innumerable useful as well as true insights (where would we be without energy?). As much as the book is thoroughly secular, I believe that the value of general human goods is honored within its pages, although unofficially.

So what is the most accurate and productive way to regard this secular theory? Christ lets us know the value of prudence, and that in carrying out the spiritual mission we should bring a bag with our belongings, and even a sword. I raise an objection to *A Theory of Everyone* for the reason that, if it colors our worldview entirely, godless (and at an official level human-goodless) and bleak—and inaccurate—it becomes. God is here (thankfully) guiding us. But if we say we have a theory of what it means to be human and don't need Him, He might just let us have what we want. Then all the enthusiasm of innovation might be over. All the energy in the world isn't enough to fill our souls.

> "ALL THE ENERGY IN THE WORLD ISN'T ENOUGH TO FILL OUR SOULS."

Moreover, the history of humanity doesn't show the greatest results for basing political decisions on an "ultimate" theory of us, brilliant though it may be. But what do we do, run away from any scientific theory of life? Where such a theory shines is in helping us navigate this strange, difficult, broken world. Our brave author is on to a fundamental dynamic of the way human beings operate: we will innovate in order to deal with finitely available energy and adjust our cooperative social structures accordingly—or be evolutionarily selected out. Take notes, y'all. In this way, we'll nourish our bellies, avoid various disasters, and much more. *But that's not the complete picture.* We must obey spiritual laws as well to nourish our souls, or we will meet other disasters as well.

A Theory of Everyone, while incomplete, is the fruit of a current academic field at the intersection of economics, biology, and psychology. We will never get to perfection in this life, but Michael Muthukrishna is bursting to clue us in on some real wisdom, excitedly swashbuckling through his chapters as he does it. He has tons to say (for political junkies, much of it deliciously relevant to current debates), as well as audacious recommendations for the future. Enjoy it—for what it is. RL

From William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794)

Photo: The William Blake Archive, Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

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HANS FIENE is the pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Crestwood, Mo., and the creator of Lutheran Satire, a multimedia project intended to teach the Christian faith through humor. He is also a contributor to *The Federalist*. A graduate of Indiana University and Concordia Theological Seminary, Hans and his wife, Katie, have four sons.

CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Rev. Hans Fiene

Q We read a lot about the deconstructors and the "nones" who are leaving the faith and/or the institutional church, but another story is clergy burnout. According to Barna, some 38% of clergy are considering leaving the pulpit. Has this always been the case? Have we always asked too much of pastors, to be not only preachers and teachers but psychologists, marriage and career counselors, etc.? Or is there something new in the air? How do you deal with the demands of your vocation?

I don't think there's ever been an especially easy time to be a pastor, and I certainly don't envy pastors who have had to deal with plagues and war, harsh religious persecution, or destructive fighting in their church bodies. What I do think is a rather unique struggle for pastors today, however, is the commodification of the church. People can travel large distances, just as they can shape much of their religious identity through social media, which means they often want pastors to be purveyors of the religious aesthetic they prefer more than they want them to be actual shepherds receiving the gifts of Christ. And I think that's the key to understanding pastoral burnout. Pastors don't

get burned out from being a pastor, really. Rather, pastors get burned out from having to be something other than pastors. So the way I avoid burnout is by pushing things off my table that aren't really "pastor things" when I feel that sense of despair looming. I've never wanted to leave the ministry after doing devotions with the preschoolers or spending an hour visiting a 95-year-old shut-in.

Q **A "low-church" theology and an anti-sacramentalism have long been features of Protestantism or at least fundamentalism and evangelicalism. When the "personal" and individualistic is so emphasized in American religion, how do you re-emphasize the necessity of the church? Has this de-churching been a factor in what appears to be a pandemic of loneliness?**

I've often said that false dilemmas are the hallmark of an immature theologian, so when people employ the "it's a relationship, not a religion" framework, this strikes me as a sign of spiritual malnourishment. The Bible calls us to see our union with God in relational terms. Jesus invites us to see His Father as our Father, to see that, in His resurrection, He has become our brother, and to recognize all those of the church as our family. And God has given us the gifts that establish this union in the religious acts of the church. In the preaching of the Gospel, we're covered in the love that belongs to each of us individually yet makes us all one. In the one baptism, we're joined to the one Lord and the one faith. In the Sacrament of the Altar, those who are separated by countless sins are made one through the righteousness of the only righteous One, Jesus Christ. To seek a relationship apart from religion is to enslave oneself to a life of loneliness. It's nothing more than thinking about food at an otherwise empty family table.

Q **You are perhaps most famous (or infamous) for your Lutheran Satire videos, in which you take on controversies in the church and even ancient heresies in a way that is both funny and instructive. What inspired this to be part of your vocation? What role can humor play in conveying God's truth? Do you ever get negative feedback from colleagues, to the effect that you may be trivializing the Faith?**

Some people are largely convinced that using humor to pick apart false teaching is an inherently bitter and unkind thing, so I've definitely gotten some criticism throughout the years for the work I've done with Lutheran Satire. I understand where those folks are coming from, but I just fundamentally disagree. Humor can be a very effective tool for picking apart false ideas. It often lets you get closer to the target than a straightforward approach would, just as it enables you to show the error of certain views in a much more concise way. That's always my aim with Lutheran Satire.

Q **I know you've written a film script called *A Christmas for Carol*, mainly because I've read it. It's very funny and I can see it becoming a very popular Netflix Christmas special easily. Do you think Christians need to carve out a Benedict Option–type "safe space" for their own entertainment and risk being ghettoized, or should budding filmmakers and actors find a way to find a niche within the larger mainstream-entertainment sphere and risk being coopted by non-Christian values?**

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If Hollywood had an interest in giving quarter to Christian content, I imagine they would have done it long ago. *The Passion of the Christ* was an easy formula to follow—have a talented Christian filmmaker, one that Christian audiences trust, make a movie. Then rake in the dollars. I don't think Hollywood failed to follow this formula because they couldn't figure it out. Rather, I think Hollywood failed to follow this formula because the only thing they want to do more than make money is not make Christian content.

So I think Christians would be better served trying to create and support their own media platforms, but that highlights another big problem, namely that those who create Christian art are often so consumed with making something "Christian" that they forget the art part. We need our storytellers to be primarily concerned with conveying Christian beauty and truth, not saccharine moralizing or reactionary propaganda.

Q Lutherans have never been big on preaching partisan politics in the pulpit. But when many among the more conservative and confessional elements of the church are now demanding more Christocentric civil and legal structures, sometimes described or denounced as "Christian Nationalism," what does Luther's Two Kingdoms theology have to offer as a response?

I think the Christian Nationalism debate is equal parts intriguing and idiotic. On the one hand, I agree with Martin Luther that God hasn't charged secular rulers with binding and forgiving sins, but He has charged them with defending and preserving the preaching of the Gospel. Luther wouldn't recognize anything biblical in the view that the Ten Commandments and statues of Baphomet must be equally welcome in the courthouse. So if God gave me a world where I could have a faithful Lutheran government, I would gladly take it.

On the other hand, any Christian student of history should be able to see that Caesar is a pretty terrible judge of what is orthodox and what isn't, so the best way Caesar can serve the church is by staying out of the heresy business. And this is where

> **"ARGUING WITH PEOPLE ABOUT THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IS LIKE ARGUING ABOUT WHETHER WE SHOULD USE A DELOREAN OR A PHONE BOOTH WHEN WE INVENT TIME TRAVEL."**

I find the hyper-online clamoring for Christian Nationalism to be so silly. We don't have faithful princes. We don't have faithful voters. We don't currently have the ingredients necessary to establish Christian Nationalism. We won't have them any time soon, and we won't have them very long if we get them. So arguing with people about the superiority of Christian Nationalism is like arguing about whether we should use a DeLorean or a phone booth when we invent time travel.

Q Fun Question: What's your favorite B&W film, and why?

Probably *The Apartment*. It's not a Christian film by any stretch of the imagination, but it's a fun and beautiful film about redemption, honor, and courage. Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine may have the best chemistry of any couple in film history.

Close runners-up: *The Seven Samurai* (for the battle scenes), *Casablanca* (for the ending), and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (I've been told that this is not a black-and-white film and that I need to see an ophthalmologist). RL

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