

Religion & Liberty

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ECONOMICS AND CULTURE



Searching for Walker Percy

The market, justice,
and charity:
A Jewish perspective

A way back from
secularism

Transhumanism:
A religion for
postmodern times

EDITOR'S NOTE

Rev. Ben Johnson MANAGING EDITOR

When I accepted the new position as managing editor of *Religion & Liberty*, only one thing had been set in stone: Caroline Roberts' article on Walker Percy would be the cover story. Everything else remained to be determined. Her essay is one of the first to come from Acton's new longform journalism platform, which combines extensive reporting with beautiful photography to give readers an immersive understanding of the subject. This project continues to grow and improve.

Curt Biren analyzes economic and social justice from a Jewish perspective. In his understanding of the Torah, "The Bible implicitly assumes the primacy of economic liberty, of entrepreneurial freedom, of the free and voluntary exchange of products and services – subject, of course, to the laws of justice."

Wesley J. Smith of the Discovery Institute writes that transhumanism has taken on the trappings of a religion, shaping the longings of Silicon Valley's creative elite.

Fr. Anthony Perkins reviews Vigen Guroian's *The Orthodox Reality: Culture, Theology, and Ethics in the Modern World*.

Fr. Robert Sirico offers a personal reflection on Russell Kirk, who would have turned 100 in October.

"In the Liberal Tradition" features Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, a Polish priest whose martyrdom in the waning days of Communism demonstrates the destruction even dying myths can inflict.

The remaining features take a panoramic view of the human condition, across time and geography. The articles traverse from Venezuela to Rome, from Cuba to Estonia. They discuss the \$15 minimum wage, the plastic straw ban, and Amazon's latest exploits. They arc from rabbinical scholars huddled over sacred manuscripts in the synagogue, to pagan emperors plotting to eradicate Christianity in ancient Rome, to modern-day waitresses fighting to protect their families from well-meaning but misguided activists in the nation's capital. The articles have such an expansive vista because Acton understands that true faith directs all our deeds, and economics consists of nothing but the sum of individual human actions. At their core, Acton's two emphases touch upon the deepest core of our shared humanity.

I'm proud to be part of the team.



Cover Photo: The path to Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana. Stephen Solis Photography/Alamy Photo

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Amazon paying higher wages is smart – forcing everyone to do so is not

Joe Carter

ACTON INSTITUTE

Amazon recently announced that it will pay all of its U.S. employees a minimum of \$15 an hour, more than double the federal minimum wage of \$7.25. The decision is a smart move for Amazon. Unfortunately, the megacompany wants to force everyone else to do the same.

“In addition to committing to higher minimum pay, Amazon says it will push Washington, D.C., policymakers for a higher federal minimum wage,” NPR reported.

Amazon can afford higher wages and benefits from pricing out their competition. Their willingness to voluntarily pay higher wages gives them an advantage over other employers.

Conservatives are right when they say government-mandated pay floors kill jobs. Not only will businesses that were willing to pay more than the minimum lose their advantage in hiring, but those not willing to pay more will fire (or not hire) people whose labor is valued at less than \$15 an hour. Once minimum wages are raised, turnover rates also increase as people decide to stick with or leave a job based on other factors. And the people who will never be hired (e.g., low-skilled workers, new immigrants) are shut out of the labor market completely.

Amazon is making an intelligent business decision, but it's only smart because they are free to make that choice for themselves. Mandating the government require a “living wage” is not only economically dumb, it's counterproductive and harmful to the poor.

When it comes to plastic straw bans, won't somebody please think of the children?

Joe Carter

ACTON INSTITUTE

Twenty years ago on *The Simpsons*, Helen Lovejoy gave us one of the most ubiquitous rallying cries in politics: “Think of the children! Won't somebody please think of the children?” The attempt to gain support for weak arguments by invoking children has become known as “Lovejoy's Law.”

Consider, for example, a recent ordinance by the Santa Barbara City Council to effectively ban plastic straws, stirrers, and cutlery in the city. Before council members voted unanimously for the ban, they listened to testimony from children about how straws were destroying our oceans. (Note: Straws are not destroying our oceans.)

“[We had] nine-year-old kids all asking to help pass these policies to protect our oceans and our waterways,” said one environmental activist after the council meeting. “The children are going to have to bear the external costs of this pollution we're producing,” said another supporter of the ordinance.

The rule of law and the common good is undermined when draconian punishments are imposed for regulatory “crimes” likes this straw ban. Restaurant employees in Santa Barbara can be punished with up to six months of jail time or a \$1,000 fine after a second offense of giving plastic straws to their customers.

Most theories of punishment are based on the idea that the punishments for crimes should either equal the harm done (retribution theory) or be just great enough to deter potential criminals

(deterrence theory). When the law is too severe, society loses faith in the ability of the government to be fair and render justice. “[I]f a community does not believe its criminal justice system is fair, then it is far less likely to cooperate with that system,” said Senator Mike Lee of Utah. “And when a community does not cooperate with law enforcement, crime goes up.”

Santa Barbara and other local governments that impose such penalties are communicating to their citizens that the laws imposed on them are absurd and unjust. Is this really the message we want to be sending our children? Do we want them believing many laws are arbitrary and unenforceable?

When it comes to defending the rule of law, won't somebody please think of the children?

D.C. restaurant workers fight against \$15-an-hour wage, and win

Joseph Sunde

ACTON INSTITUTE

Last June, Washington, D.C. residents voted to pass Initiative 77, a ballot measure that raised the minimum wage for all restaurant workers to at least \$15 an hour. Yet many of the very workers whom the law sought to rescue fought vociferously to have it repealed. On October 2, after significant pushback, their wishes were granted.

“On an 8-to-5 vote – the first of two necessary votes – the D.C. Council approved legislation repealing Initiative 77,” wrote Fenit Nirappil in *The Washington Post*. (All but one of the eight councilmembers are Democrats; the other is an independent.) Worried about

declines in tipping and cuts in staff, restaurant servers, saw through the claims of “economic justice.”

“Though it was served up as a progressive plan to hike wages, Initiative 77 would have actually cost many workers money,” Eric Boehm summarized at *Reason*. “The proposal abolished the so-called ‘tipped minimum wage’ of \$3.50 cents per hour, replacing it with a \$15 minimum wage for all food service workers in the city. But workers that I (and other reporters) talked to before the vote told me that they often make far more than \$15 an hour, thanks to tips.”

The workers were close enough to the economic signals to understand that prices are not play things. Now, thanks to their efforts, the District's restaurant industry can continue growing as industries typically do: not through artificial scheming, but through trial and error based on price information tied to authentic, personal decisions.

Whatever qualms we may have with the “fairness” of this or that employer's particular wage rates, to subvert these signals is likely to lead to more hardship. Market signals serve a central purpose in guiding our activity toward actual human needs.

With Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC United) already achieving similar “One Fair Wage” laws in seven other states – including California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Nevada, Montana, and Minnesota – there are plenty of victims and casualties. But the example of D.C.'s restaurant-worker resistance shows us that economic laws can only be ignored and subverted so far – and that it is possible for business owners to collaborate with their employees in the fight for true economic justice.



ESSAY

‘For your freedom and ours’: Mari-Ann Kelam and Estonia’s Singing Revolution

Rev. Ben Johnson

When I asked Mari-Ann Kelam about the seven-hour delay she endured on an airport runway coming to speak at an Acton Institute event at Wheaton College, she evinced no hint of irritation. “There are worse places we could be,” she answered demurely.

Kelam – immaculately poised, a rare combination of grace and dignity that eschews the spotlight – seemed to prefer discussing her family’s journey from despotism to freedom. Her parents fled Tallinn, the capital of Soviet-occupied Estonia, in September 1944 on “one of the last ships to get out.” When her parents fled her homeland, they took little besides a Phillips radio, which “saved them on many occasions, because they could follow the news.” Her parents emigrated to Czechoslovakia, then to U.S.-controlled West Germany, where Mari-Ann was born. Under the terms of the Displaced Persons Act, her family settled in Bellevue, Ohio, a small town near Lake Erie.

“Their reaction to America was, ‘Wow, there are so many churches here.’ The small town of Bellevue must have had a dozen churches for 8,000 people,” said Kelam, a practicing Lutheran.

Faith soothed the pain of earthly doubt. “The biggest challenge was not knowing what had happened to your family,” she said. Her maternal grandmother opted not to join them on the boat out of Tallinn, promising to follow shortly. The Soviets bombed the next ship – a boat full of refugees – leaving her family to assume the worst. Only after Stalin’s death in 1953 did a letter come, forwarded through a variety of intermediary destinations, telling the family that her grandmother remained alive.

Her mother began speaking at every function she could find – Rotary Club meetings, civic meetings, church events – about the reality of life in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. “She felt she had a duty to warn the American people how easily you can lose your freedom,” Kelam said. Estonia had lost its freedom in a deal between two of the twentieth century’s greatest madmen.

Between two totalitarianisms

The colonial ideologies of Nazism and Communism divided Eastern Europe between themselves on August 23, 1939,

Photo: Mari-Ann Kelam – Tune Kelam – 2011 – Song Competition – by Ave Maria Music – GNU Free License

with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Stalin's Soviet Union occupied Estonia, only to be displaced by Nazi invaders in 1941. During their initial occupation, the Soviets deported more than 10,000 Estonians to Siberia. When the Soviets returned in 1944, the mass deportations resumed – with ferocity. The newly unveiled monument to the Estonians who died in Siberian exile records the names of the 22,000 victims known so far – excluding those who died in occupied Estonia, survived captivity, or faded into the anonymity of mass atrocities.

Soon, young Mari-Ann followed her mother's footsteps. As a teenager, she rallied attendees at Girls State against Communist expansionism. As an adult, she kicked off a lobbying and publicity effort ambitious by today's standards – much less those of the pre-internet era, when submissions had to get past mainstream media gatekeepers. She wrote letters to the editor as often as possible. She altered her voice to call into radio talk shows more frequently. She wrote tirelessly, under her own name and pseudonymously. "Once, *The Washington Times* had a Baltic focus and published six letters to the editor on the topic," she said. "Five of them were by me," under various names.

She organized protests against every Soviet human rights violation – once having a face-to-face meeting with the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze, in the middle of a street on Washington's Embassy Row. After each coordinated event, Kelam went just a bit further, something she calls "doing the last five percent."

"The last five percent for me has been extremely important," Kelam told me. "After you have a successful demonstration, everybody goes out and has a beer – and Mari-Ann goes to the phone booth and calls the Associated Press and asks, 'Why weren't you there covering this?' And as a result, she gets an article in the paper, which wouldn't have happened without the last five percent."

In another instance, Ted Koppel's TV show *Nightline* invited members of the Baltic community to be part of the background. "There was a woman going through the audience asking if anyone had a question," Kelam said. "They called all the people [who wanted] to speak in a long line, and I was near the end." As the

clock ticked down to the end of the show, "the people ahead of me all sat down. I kept standing, and he ran the show over, which is unusual for American television. And I got my question" about the Soviet domination of Estonia – merely because she had been the one person not to give up. Protest after protest, phone call after phone call, letter after letter, one lobbying meeting after another, she just kept going.

"God was with me, that's all I can say," she said, looking into the distance. "So many times I pray before I have these events." And when discouragement threatened to overwhelm her, strength cascaded into her life unexpectedly.

Sincerely, Ronald Reagan

"My mother inspired me, and then, in 1983, I was inspired from the highest levels," she said. After one of her regular letters to the president, she received a green envelope with the return address marked "White House." With trembling hands, she opened the signed letter dated September 6, 1983, which read:

I was deeply touched by your letter. You exemplify one of the deepest reasons why America has succeeded as a nation: people came here from every land under the sun and they discovered a country which enabled them to prosper, which inspired their loyalty – and yet never asked them to renounce their own sense of cultural identity and ethnicity. On the contrary, the fabric of American life is like a rich tapestry woven from many strands of different textures and colors – unified by a common respect for our free institutions based on the dignity of every person as a child of God.

Too often, sadly, we Americans take our freedom for granted like the air we breathe. We do not see the danger from predatory empires that fear freedom and hate God. You can perform a real service to our country by continuing to alert your fellow Americans about the dangers we face. We must remain strong and vigilant, but government can do only so much. We need a national consensus in support of sound policies. I want to thank you for doing your part. Do not become

discouraged. Continue to pray for your ancestral homeland and for your adopted land. I join you in those prayers. God bless you.

*Sincerely,
Ronald Reagan*

She went on to lobby, and work closely with the Reagan administration. "We were at the table" throughout his tenure in office, she said. President Reagan, she said, had a visceral desire to end Marxist bondage.

Meanwhile Reagan's celebrated counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, tried to maintain the fiction of Communism, including perpetuating the Soviet domination of the Baltics. In 1988, he appointed longtime friend Vaino Väljas to lead the Estonian Communist Party. When Väljas ignored Estonian nationalists' actions, Gorbachev scolded him, "We have to search for our answers only in the framework of socialism."

The people of the Baltics sought their answers elsewhere, including in solidarity with one another. On August 23, 1989 – the fiftieth anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact – hundreds of thousands of people joined hands in a human chain stretching 370 miles from Estonia to Lithuania. Proud and independent citizens of all three nations snaked along the roads linking Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius.

Building on their momentum, in 1990 activists registered virtually all Estonians as citizens of an independent nation and, in February, those citizens elected the Congress of Estonia. Although the USSR did not recognize its legal authority, it had such moral authority that some Estonians actually saw it as the legally constituted government.

In 1991, Soviet tanks rolled into Lithuania's capital city of Vilnius, where the Red Army killed 14 Lithuanians and wounded hundreds more. Days later, Soviet forces killed six more people in Latvia's capital city of Riga. Whether the actions occurred without Gorbachev's knowledge or constituted him baring his infamous "iron teeth" remains disputed. No one denies that the troops' northern thrust toward Tallinn seemed inexorable.

That August, hardline Communist apparatchiks kidnapped Gorbachev, but the actions which they intended to snuff out liberty in the USSR sparked a rebirth of freedom. At just after 11 p.m. on August 20,

1991 – with Soviet tanks bound for Tallinn – the Congress of Estonia unanimously reasserted the nation's independence.

The delegates *reasserted* their independence; they did not *declare* independence, Kelam takes pains to stress. “There is a very important difference, because of the legal ramifications,” she said. Reasserting independence restores the nation to its *status quo ante* before the occupation: Its constitution, borders, and citizenship returned to those before 1939. Thus, many are celebrating 2018 as the centenary of Estonian independence.

As the Evil Empire disintegrated into rubble, Kelam's relationship with Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, also turned rocky. British scholar Sarah B. Snyder characterized the elder Bush's foreign policy as a “preference for stability over transformation and low prioritisation of human rights.” Kelam said Bush offered little substantive support to the captive nations. (“I actually ended up voting for Clinton” in 1992, Kelam said.) Bill Clinton and George W. Bush worked to advance freedom in Estonia, she said – modestly failing to mention that she met one president after another, whether supportive or hostile.

Estonia emerges

During that time, Estonia underwent perhaps the most successful transformation of the post-Soviet era and blossomed into a thriving, independent republic. Today, Estonia ranks as the seventh freest nation in the world in the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, and tenth according to the Fraser Institute. Freedom House describes Estonia as a “free” country where “political and civil rights are widely respected.” Transparency International rates Estonia's level of government corruption just behind Japan – and superior to France, Spain, and Portugal.

“We never had the Marshall Plan. We were locked down in the Soviet Union,” Kelam said. “But,” she added with her characteristic modesty, “we've done quite well.”

In the midst of lobbying across two continents, she met her husband – Tuune Kelam, an Estonian dissident whom the Soviets had removed from his position as an encyclopedia editor and forced to work on a chicken farm. He now represents his nation as a Member of European Parliament.

Mari-Ann became spokeswoman for

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a Member of Parliament. She still serves in her local government.

“Sometimes I leaf through the book,” her 2002 autobiography, *Kogu Südamest*, soon to be published in English, “and think, ‘Mari-Ann, you really did do quite a bit.’ At the time, you're just doing it. And every incident leads to another. You publish your first letter to the editor in *The Washington Post*, and you just want to write another one right away.”

Her influence came from marrying indefatigable action with her Christian faith and personal dignity.

“I just tell people that I've done it from the heart, and I've done it with style – in the sense that I've never been rude or vulgar. I have said some harsh things, but never in a rude or vulgar way,” she said. Glancing at Brett Kavanaugh's Senate Judiciary Committee hearings playing on a nearby television screen in the hotel lobby, she added, “And nothing like they're doing now.”

For Mari-Ann, the struggle never ends. She still holds weekly protests in front of the Russian embassy in Estonia over the war in Ukraine. She writes about Moscow's foreign propaganda efforts, from the viewpoint of tiny Eastern European nations living in what they see as the foreboding shadow of Putin's Russia. She cites Chinese incursions on liberty and has traveled to Israel. Her activism knows no boundaries except those where freedom finds itself caged.

Educating Wheaton

And she returns to the United States, which declared the occupation of the Baltics illegitimate for 50 years but today has little memory of the dangers of Communism. Increasingly, socialism seems trendy and full-blown Communism is considered cutting-edge. Kelam dashed off a prescient article about Walmart selling t-shirts featuring the hammer-and-sickle logo, which was published during her trip. A series of Baltic political leaders wrote to Walmart, and the chain pulled the merchandise.

When Kelam writes, she gets results. And when she speaks, she touches hearts. At Wheaton, she screened the 2006 documentary *The Singing Revolution*, which traces the role that the Estonian song festival, *Laulupidu*, played in national resistance. The patriotic songs and

celebration of Estonian culture kept the nation's spirit alive during occupation; even the festival grounds acted as a magnet for national liberation protests. It makes real the heroism, sacrifice, and celebration of the human spirit at the heart of Estonian independence. “It's not often I see a documentary film that puts a tear in my eye,” said David Iglesias, director of the Wheaton Center for Faith, Politics and Economics while introducing Kelam's speech afterwards.

Mari-Ann also comes to inform. “I'm embarrassed to admit, I was totally ignorant any of this happened,” one young female student said in the question-and-answer session. Kelam suggests three books the student can read if she wishes to learn more about the topic.

But the students are not entirely to blame. “The sources of information are really drying up,” Kelam said. “I'm appalled when I'm here, trying to find news. They don't cover international news very much.” Worse, “universities are full of professors from the Sixties who think [Communism and socialism] are great,” she said – a view not held by those who experienced them firsthand. (Wheaton is one of a number of colleges that is, thankfully, exempt from this trend.)

After several questions – and commendations from an ethnic Ukrainian and Lithuanian in the audience – lines formed to ask her a question or offer her a quick word of encouragement. A dozen or more people queue up, each receiving her unflagging attention.

After the last question, and long after the event's scheduled end, she poses for pictures with new friends from the area's Estonian community. Around 10 p.m., still carrying on animated conversation, Kelam climbs into the passenger seat for a ride back to the hotel, and a (very) brief rest, before boarding her 6 a.m. flight. She will speak again at an Acton-sponsored event in New York the next day.

When asked why she has done all she has – and continues to do – for Estonia and other theaters of liberty, she quotes a phrase uttered by former Czech statesman Václav Havel: “For your freedom and ours.”

Rev. Ben Johnson is an Eastern Orthodox priest, senior editor at the Acton Institute, and managing editor of Religion & Liberty.

R&L

Cuba's doctor rebellion

You get tired of being a slave

Joseph Sunde

"You are trained in Cuba and our education is free. Health care is free, but at what price? You wind up paying for it your whole life." —Dr. Yaili Jiménez Gutierrez

In 2013, the World Health Organization brokered a deal through which Cuba would export doctors to Brazil to serve in its poorest and most remote areas. Yet as Brazil began to reap the benefits of improved care and decreased mortality rates, the Cuban doctors began to see their home's regime in a new light.

"When you leave Cuba for the first time, you discover many things that you had been blind to," says Yaili Jiménez Gutierrez, one of the program's doctors, in a *New York Times* profile. "There comes a time when you get tired of being a slave."

The Cuban doctors began noticing the disparity in their government's "take" from the Brazilian government — nearly four times their own salary — as well as the higher wages and greater freedoms enjoyed by their fellow "export doctors" from other participating countries.

"We began to see that the conditions for the other doctors were totally different," Jiménez explains. "They could be with their family, bring their kids. The salaries were much higher."

In response, more than 150 Cuban doctors have now filed lawsuits in Brazilian courts, claiming equality protections under Brazil's Constitution, and requesting that they remain in the country as independent contractors with the ability to earn a full salary.

The *New York Times* summarizes the situation as follows:

Anis Deli Grana de Carvalho, a doctor from Cuba, was coming to the end of her three year medical assignment. But having married a Brazilian man, she wanted to stay and keep working. [Her] pastor was outraged to learn that, under the terms of their employment, Cuban doctors earn only about a quarter of the amount the Brazilian government pays Cuba for their services. ... In late September of last year, she sued in federal court to work as an independent contractor. Within weeks, scores of other Cuban doctors followed Dr. Grana's lead and filed suits in Brazilian courts.

As for how the Cuban government has responded thus far, some have been allowed to keep their jobs or return home, while others were fired and face exile. "One federal judge in the capital denounced the Cuban contracts as a 'form of slave labor' that could not be tolerated," the *Times* reports. But other judges found that "allowing Cuban doctors to walk away from their contracts posed 'undue risks in the political and diplomatic spheres.'"

The costs have been high for those who left family behind in order to pursue a better livelihood or improve their prospects upon returning home. But for many, the risks have been well worth it.

"It's sad to leave your family and friends, and your homeland," says Maireilys Álvarez Rodríguez, a doctor who sued the government, but managed to keep her job and bring her children to Brazil. "But here we're in a country where you're free, where no one asks you where you're going or tells you what you have to do. In Cuba, your life is dictated by the government."

We routinely hear critics of capitalism decry the supposed injustices of free wages set by free markets, driven by the actions of free people. Yet note how doctors from Cuba, a land which supposedly places priority on "equality," run to Brazil for equality protections. The irony is painful and shows the illusory nature of an equality based only on material output.

Joseph Sunde is an associate editor and writer for the Acton Institute. Joseph resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with his wife and four children. [R&L](#)

A PIZZERIA IN ROME HIGHLIGHTS THE GIFT OF DOWN SYNDROME

Joseph Sunde

In 2000, two parents founded a pizzeria in Rome with the goal of employing people with Down syndrome. Inspired by their son, who had the condition, they named it La Locanda dei Girasoli ("The Sunflower Inn").

Today, the restaurant employs five people with Down syndrome, three people with other conditions — and boasts 4.5-stars on TripAdvisor.

According to their website, the restaurant's goal is to "promote the employment of people with Down syndrome, ennobling and giving dignity to the individual through a path to training and work placement."

With the abortion rate of those with Down syndrome now edging 90 percent, modern society's distorted view sees these people as somehow lacking dignity and value. This robs the world of beautiful people and their joyful, creative contributions.

Customers not only "see that our workers are great at getting the job done," explains Ugo Menghini, one of the restaurant's managers, but "they see a human side to the restaurant."

It's a beautiful display of the transformative power of business and the abundance bound up in the hearts and hands of all people.

Business owners would do well to heed these stories and challenge pre-conceptions that impose limited notions of "value" on those around us. What we label as a "disability" may very well be the exact opposite.

Opportunities abound for creative contributions by all people. We should aim for an economic environment where they are encouraged, celebrated, and embraced.



ESSAY

The market, justice and charity: A Jewish perspective

Curt Biren



Photo: Maurice Gottlieb - 1878: Pointing - Jews Praying in The Synagogue On Yom Kippur - Public Domain

Not a day goes by when there's not some concern raised about the state of the economy and how people are faring. While recent economic growth has been promising, wage growth is lackluster, many say. The middle class is shrinking. There's too much income inequality, and the list goes on. These concerns are often compelling. Who wouldn't like to see more opportunity and more growth? People yearn for the good life, to experience real human flourishing. Yet many in our society seem to be falling short.

Surely there must be something more that we as a society can do. Are there not public policies and programs, many ask, that, if structured and funded properly, could lead to the outcomes we seek? It's a tempting vision and, for many, government intervention in the economy seems compassionate and fair. Yet this approach raises a number of questions. Do such public policies and programs actually work? More importantly, do they cohere with our traditional values of justice and charity?

Let's assume that we have conclusive data that confirm an unfair or undesirable state of affairs exists. For example, wages are stagnating, the middle class is shrinking, or income inequality is growing. And let's assume that we could allocate adequate funding and implement public policies or programs meant to rectify this situation over time. We could try to steer our economy or specific aspects of our society toward particular outcomes.

The idea has a certain appeal. But would it work? Would we have all the necessary information and know-how to socially engineer such results over time? And would we be able to do so without inadvertently causing indirect harm in some other way?

The issue is not new. The renowned twentieth-century economist F.A. Hayek, in his many writings, discussed in detail the intellectual hubris associated with such endeavors. In short, Hayek concluded, such undertakings would not work. To his point, there are many real world examples that seem to prove him right – including many of the shortcomings of the Great Society programs of the Sixties, not to mention the failings of more extreme versions of centralized planning, like communist regimes over the last century.

Moreover, Hayek would say, letting the economy grow through myriad voluntary market transactions, rather than through centrally designed public policies and programs, would lead to a “spontaneous order” that will generate more opportunities for more people over time. And there's certainly much evidence in his favor.

Many understand and agree with the Hayekian perspective. They are not easily convinced of grand economic and social policy experiments, however well intentioned. Others are not deterred by Hayek or anyone else who raises similar concerns. For them, utilizing more public policies and programs to improve the status quo seems worthwhile and feasible.

These political debates continue with no apparent resolution in sight – not only in assessing the effectiveness of various policies but also in deciding upon the desired goals and objectives for such government initiatives in the first place. Should we focus on policies and programs that lead to more economic growth or ones that spread the benefits of such growth more equally throughout our society?

There's another, even more important question to ask, however, one that relates to the first principles of our society: Are such endeavors just? Are such public policies and programs – aimed, for example, at improving wages, growing the middle class, reducing income inequality – consistent with our conception of justice?

For some, the answer is “yes.” These people subscribe to a broad conception of justice – sometimes called social justice, economic justice, or distributive justice. Under a type of Rawlsian calculus, economic disadvantages are seen as a function of some unfair state of affairs. Those deemed to be disadvantaged are accorded additional rights – rights to a better situation today and to a better economic future tomorrow – especially in a society as prosperous and affluent as ours.

Some might find this broad conception of justice to be compelling, but is it consistent with our traditional notion of justice?

The traditional view of justice reflects first principles – principles which are inherent, if not explicit, in the Hebrew Bible. They seem self-evident but are worth reiterating. There is right and wrong – with wrongs, like transgressions against another's life or property, codified in law. We have free will. We are responsible and accountable for our individual actions and their consequences (excluding those beyond our control). In being held accountable, we are subject to receiving our just desert, with equality under the law favoring neither the poor nor the rich.

The principles seem straightforward, appealing to our common sense. They not only make sense but, for many, they are also godly. They reflect transcendent, eternal, universal, and moral values, as best as we can discern them.

Does the broad conception of justice – social justice, economic justice, distributive justice – cohere with the traditional notion of justice?

The broad conception of justice inevitably focuses on states of affairs, such as lackluster wage growth, a shrinking middle class, or growing income inequality, as distinct from individual actions for which one can be held accountable. In other words, states of affairs, not individual actions, are to be judged as just or unjust.

Yet, how exactly does one make such a judgment? “Do not steal” is a fairly straightforward concept of justice, rooted in a transcendent value – something eternal and universal – based on individual action for which one can be held accountable. Judging a state of affairs to be unjust is completely different. Exactly what level of wage growth is to be considered unjust? How small does the middle class have to get for it to be unjust? How much income inequality is unjust?

Some may look to economics or one of the other social sciences to discern if some state of affairs is unjust. But this betrays a misunderstanding. The social sciences can give us insights into many important economic and social factors and trends, and they can posit cause-and-effect relationships that may be helpful in understanding particular issues. However, they can never tell us what is unjust – which is a normative question, not a scientific one.

Without a clear concept of justice rooted in something transcendent, designating a particular state of affairs as unjust entails an arbitrary, and moving, target. More and more rights end up being propounded for more and more people. Will there ever be a time when income inequality in our society is not judged to be unjust?

Most importantly, judging states of affairs to be unjust – and seeking legal remedies using the coercive power of government – will inevitably conflict with traditional notions of justice. For example, if there is a perception of too much income inequality, then the government will need to take from those with too much income, even when they themselves may have done

nothing wrong. In effect, theft from the government – “legal plunder” in the words of the nineteenth-century French economist Frederic Bastiat – is being condoned in this instance as a form of justice, even though “do not steal” is one of the traditional cornerstones of justice. (This is not to deny the rationale for taxes to fund public services, including a basic social safety net.)

One might ask, “Is there nothing on justice in the Hebrew Bible that’s related to economic goals and outcomes?” Not really. There’s nothing on wage growth, nothing on the size of the middle class, nothing on income inequality. Rather, the Bible implicitly assumes the primacy of economic liberty, of entrepreneurial freedom, of the free and voluntary exchange of products and services – subject, of course, to the laws of justice. In this sense, our biblical tradition entails no broad consequentialist framework nor utilitarian calculations.

Some, in arguing for some form of distributive justice, cite Leviticus 25:10, where one is called upon, in the Jubilee Year (the fiftieth year following seven cycles of sabbatical years) to “return each man to his ancestral heritage” – i.e., to return the land to its original ancestral owners. The idea, some conclude, is to redistribute potentially unequal wealth.

This, however, does not appear to be an accurate interpretation. The obligation to return land had no legal significance. It simply reflected a religious obligation, with no effect on the rights of anyone’s private property, however unequally manifested in the community. It’s worth noting, as well, that the practice was likely never observed after the pre-exilic period.

One might also ask, “Is there no conception of the common good in the Hebrew Bible and all that that might entail?” Again, not really. The Bible is replete with promises of blessings, both spiritual and material, assuming one follows the commandments. And, for some, it embodies the hope of messianic times. But there is no specific conception of the common good, nor prescriptions for policy and law that one could try to legislate for the common good.

Some find a rationale for the broad conception of justice within the modern interpretation of *tikkun olam*, sometimes translated as “repair of the world.” According to this view, not only must we mete out justice as traditionally conceived, but we must also do what we can to make the

world a better place. For many, this includes creating more public policies and programs to help more people and to reduce inequalities – inevitably entailing more legal and financial obligations imposed on others by the government.

However, while this modern version of *tikkun olam* may appeal to some, the traditional concept of *tikkun olam* is very different. The term is found in select parts of the Talmud, the ancient rabbinical commentaries on the Hebrew Bible and its interpretations. Typically translated as “for the benefit of society,” it is invoked to adjust particular laws in order to avoid certain perverse results. It is in the *Aleinu* prayer, recited as part of the daily prayer service, but here it expresses the hope that the world will be perfected under the kingdom of God. It’s also found within Lurianic Kabbalah, but in this case the focus is on a spiritual mending of the cosmos, not on political solutions for the country or the world.

Still others try to find a scriptural basis for the broad conception of justice. For example, in Deuteronomy 16:20, Moses says to the Israelites “*Tzedek, tzedek, shall you pursue.*” The word *tzedek* is sometimes translated as justice. The word *tzedekah* typically means charity. So, for some, charity is seen as a form of justice. It therefore entails, not just moral duties, but also legal obligations – ones that the government can impose on others.

Concern for those in need is undeniably laudatory. We as a society presumably could do much more to help those in need. And, some would argue, if we have to assume additional legal and financial obligations to make it happen, perhaps that is not only the charitable thing to do but also the just thing to do.

This link between justice and charity is questionable, though. Another translation for *tzedek* is “righteousness.” A *tzaddik* is a righteous person. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible, when referring to laws of justice, often uses a different word – *mishpat* – not *tzedek*.

It seems clear that justice and charity are two very different concepts in the Bible. As Israeli scholar Joseph Isaac Lifshitz clarifies in his book *Judaism, Law & the Free Market: An Analysis*:

Charity is considered an act of kindness rather than an act of justice. This means that charity does not redefine property rights. The rich

man does not owe the needy, and the charity he gives is not a redistribution of his wealth according to justice.

This is not to minimize the importance of charity. The Hebrew Bible continually implores us to help the poor, along with the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Moreover, within the tradition, there is a role to be played by the community – which, in earlier times, entailed charity collectors.

However, the community's role is to be limited. The primary responsibility for charity is to be assumed by individuals and families. As Lifshitz notes, "It may be argued that a state should bear some responsibility and help the needy – but it is a responsibility that functions from the bottom up rather than from the top down. While the state does have particular welfare responsibilities, these should supplant the primary responsibility that falls on the individual and families."

Needless to say, doing charity well is often easier said than done. The great twelfth-century Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides devised eight levels of charity. The lowest level is when one gives unwillingly. The highest level is when one helps someone get back on his feet so that he will not be dependent on others in the future.

Justice and charity are undoubtedly core values which define what is good and right in our society, values which have led to enormous blessings over the years. However, justice and charity are often conflated, which runs the risk of distorting justice and undermining charity.

There can be no dispute about the fact that social and economic disparities abound throughout our society. However, within the traditional Jewish approach, these do not constitute issues of justice in and of themselves. They may suggest the need to be more charitable to the disadvantaged – depending on the situation – but this pertains to the moral obligation to be of help, not to the matter of justice.

As it says in the words from Micah 6:8, what are we obligated to do? "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

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BRIEF

IN SOCIALIST VENEZUELA, EMERGING CAPITALISTS MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

Joseph Sunde

The Venezuelan people continue to struggle and suffer the effects of socialist policies – poverty and hunger, swelling suicide rates, and widespread social unrest, which the government blames on "global capitalism." Meanwhile, Venezuela's *local* capitalism is beginning to emerge as the solution to the woes caused by socialism.

"Hyperinflation and scarcity have the Bolivarian revolution's socialist heart pulsing with entrepreneurship," writes Patricia Laya at *Bloomberg*. "Desperate citizens are eking out a living with ventures such as digging home water wells, bartering bananas for haircuts, and transporting commuters in animal-cargo trucks. The economy's erosion has created markets and market players where none existed."

For Yessica Vaamonde and her husband, Jose Ramirez, an opportunity was found in repairing damaged light bulbs. Vaamonde now spends her days walking through the slums of Caracas, collecting bulbs and bringing them back to her husband, who repairs up to 50 a day and sells them for a profit.

"I had to improvise in this crisis," says Ramirez. "Many people today have to pick food over buying things like lightbulbs. I do things well, and I help them afford a good product that will last."

For Yhoan Guerrero, the economic

collapse meant leaving his job as a paramedic to repair tires, which paid much better. "Often people will come in begging for a cheap fix," Laya writes.

"We save people around here," Guerrero says. "With the country being how it is, no one can afford a new tire." Guerrero says he "gets them moving again."

Far from being crushed by the decades-long abuses of an oppressive socialist regime, Venezuela's emerging entrepreneurs are demonstrating the real solution to economic scarcity and social desperation: human ingenuity and creativity freely expressed in the service of others.

"We're seeing a new phenomenon under the worst of circumstances," says historian Tomas Straka, a professor at Andres Bello Catholic University in Caracas.

These entrepreneurs remind us, yet again, of the inherent, God-given dignity and creative capacity of the human person. These are features that exist and endure, not fading or deteriorating according to the economic, social, or political dysfunction that surrounds us.

No matter how much our governments and economic institutions may fail, those basic human attributes and gifts remain, and the human calling to create and serve will eventually reawaken and renew.

Searching for Walker Percy

Caroline Roberts

A little more than 30 years ago, a group of Southern women dedicated to preserving the memories of their small Louisiana town of St. Francisville formed an organization called The Julius Freyhan Foundation, named after a Jewish immigrant who had helped build the town's first public school.

Julius Freyhan migrated to St. Francisville in the mid-1800s to find freedom from religious persecution in Germany. He quickly rose to success as a businessman and opened the main dry goods store in the area, Freyhan and Company, selling everything from horse-drawn buggies to pinewood coffins. Both southeast Louisiana and southwest Mississippi owed thanks to Freyhan for supplies. In a post-Civil War society, Freyhan helped keep Southern farmers financially afloat, and as Freyhan succeeded, he poured money back into his community, helping to fund the Julius Freyhan High School and a local synagogue, Temple Sinai.

A beautiful three-story building, the Freyhan School now stands in disrepair, overlooking the Mississippi River. Yellowed wainscoting, rusty, patterned tin ceilings, and an overgrown football field are now the only testaments to a once vibrant school and its generous namesake. The Julius Freyhan Foundation, however, is working to change that through unlikely means: the memory of Walker Percy.

St. Francisville is now the epicenter for a uniquely Southern gathering, the literary festival known as Walker Percy Weekend, a celebration of the life and works of Walker Percy, the twentieth-century Southern writer. As someone who graduated from a small college in Pennsylvania with a degree in English, I was familiar with Percy and liked his work but wanted to know more. What was it about Percy that drew so many people to a small Louisiana town?

Walker Percy's influence

Located in West Feliciana Parish about 40 minutes north of Baton Rouge, St. Francisville is home to just over 1,700 people, but it's one of Louisiana's singular tourist draws. Many historic sites and plantations attract people looking for the antebellum South, including Rosedown Plantation, Afton Villa Gardens, and the infamously haunted Myrtles Plantation. But for the past five years, the town has given visitors another reason to travel south.

Rod Dreher, the *New York Times* bestselling author and journalist, was instrumental in the creation of the event and explains the far-reaching scope of Percy's influence this way: "I think the first year, we had people coming from Canada and all



over the U.S. ... Most people who come to the festival aren't locals. We have definitely grown in renown." If it weren't for the fact that St. Francisville has limited accommodations, the number of tickets sold would probably reach well over the cap of approximately 400. "It delights me as we become known to a new generation of people for our connections to Percy," Dreher said.

The catalyst for the event was a woman named Nancy Vinci, described by Dreher as the matriarch of West Feliciana Parish and now in her eighth decade. Vinci knew that Dreher was a writer and had connections to bring people from all over the country to their town. One day, she knocks on Dreher's door and tells him that St. Francisville needs a new festival. "I was

Photo: The path to Oak Alley Plantation in Wacherre, Louisiana. Stephen Saks Photography/Alamy Photo



startled to see her there because she is such a formidable presence,' Dreher recalled. "A wonderful person, but when Miss Nancy comes by and tells you she wants something, you jump." Dreher, knowing that Percy is probably the most famous writer Louisiana has produced and that some of Percy's distant relatives live in the area, suggested a literary festival centered on his writings. Vinci loved the idea, and a year later, they put the project into motion, launching the first festival in 2014.

Born and raised in Earle, Arkansas, Vinci has a passion for keeping history alive. She married at the age of 18 after meeting her husband at Ole Miss, and moved with him to his hometown, St. Francisville. "In my town, there was nothing old there," she said in her thick drawl. "You cut down in the Delta

so you can plant cotton right up to the edge of town, but in St. Francisville, we have so many historic buildings. It just grabbed me." Visiting St. Francisville does feel a bit like stepping back in time, but it takes work to keep those historic memories alive, as the buildings being restored by the Freyhan Foundation had once been listed as endangered by the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation.

"I didn't go to the Freyhan School, but my husband did, along with Anne Bennett, one of my best friends in St. Francisville," Vinci told me. "Anne was president of the foundation when she got cancer. I visited her every day, and every day she said to me, 'Will you help with this project?'" After the death of her friend, Vinci stepped into her shoes as president and helped the preservation foundation make progress by raising money and investing it back into the community.

After receiving a matching grant from the National Park Service, the Julius Freyhan Foundation was able to restore St. Francisville's historic synagogue to the tune of half-a-million dollars, and Temple Sinai is now used as a space for weddings and community activities.

Vinci has a fondness for old buildings and architecture. "When my husband and I first went back to St. Francisville, we took what had been a worker's cabin and redid it," Vinci said. "I've never lived in a new house, and I don't want to live in a new house. I want to live in a house that's got some history to it, you know?" It was this passion for history that motivated Vinci to raise funds for the Freyhan Foundation with proceeds from the Percy festival. Percy, although not originally from St. Francisville, set his novels largely in New Orleans and the semi-fictional Feliciana Parish. "I wanted a literary festival. I didn't want just another parade, but I wanted a different feel for our town," Vinci said. "Our town is different, there's no two ways about it. And we need to keep those stories alive."

Day One: Southern Culture

The festival events are made up of lectures, panel discussions, book readings, and social events. It's a festival billed for lovers of "good food, craft beer and bourbon, live music, and discussions about books and Southern culture under the live oaks." Every festival attendee was given a deep dive into the Southern experience, complete with nineteenth-century accommodations and crawfish boils. I was lucky enough to stay at The Cottage Plantation, built in the late eighteenth century on antebellum land. Today the plantation is used as a bed and breakfast featuring some of the original furniture. Most of the plantation buildings, including the greenhouse, milk house, and kitchen remain standing, framed with Spanish oak moss.

The first day of the festival began on a Friday night. That evening, people dressed in seersucker suits and white linen dresses gathered at the historic Grace Episcopal Church yard for a reception over mint juleps. It was there that I struck up a conversation with Brian A. Smith, the managing editor of Liberty Fund's Law and Liberty online publication. To my surprise, he told me that he often gives Percy's book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, to young adults who he knows are searching for purpose, because the book acts like "a mirror." "You'll see just about every worldview dancing around in our society today, represented in its pages," Smith said. "And they're all given pretty unstinted



criticism. So, I guess if there's been a strategy behind my giving the book out, it's always been that people who are asking questions about the meaning of life often find that Percy has named it, named their confusions, and given them good reasons for it."

Lost in the Cosmos may be one of Percy's strangest works, and that's saying something. In it, Percy does not shy away from criticizing Christians and unbelievers, as well as people all across the political spectrum. In his parody of a self-help book, Percy cuts through the everyday routine of life and sends readers along a frenzied path of exploration, presenting them with questions and "thought experiments" designed to shake up the reader's assumptions and realize a purposeful life. *Lost in the Cosmos*, along with most of Percy's library of work, is an example of the use of deeply philosophical narration to reach readers.

Percy said in an interview captured in *Walker Percy: A Documentary Film*: "I'm a Catholic novelist in the sense that the Catholic faith, which is the Judeo-Christian background, informs me as a writer, and it has to do not so much with an explicit faith or transmitting an explicit faith in my writings, as it has to do with the view of man, the theory of man ... man as man the wayfarer, man the pilgrim, man in transit, on a journey." Percy didn't set out to write specifically Catholic novels, but his worldview informs his writing. Instead of directly handing his readers the answers to life's big questions, Percy subtly weaved them into compelling, unforgettable stories. The identification of man as a wayfarer is what festival attendees told me caused them to fall in love with Percy's writings, what they felt they could connect with and what helped them along their search for purpose.

It was when he began reading and rereading Percy as a person who was coming closer to accepting Christianity that Smith realized Percy gave him reasons to believe. "And he's given lots of people over the years reasons to see faith as a possibility," he told me. Smith has written much on Percy over the years, including *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*, a helpful guide to understanding Percy's philosophy.

Troubled beginnings

The oldest of three boys, Percy was born in Birmingham, Alabama, where he was pulled into the wake of family depression. Shortly before Percy's first birthday, his grandfather committed suicide, followed by his father 12 years later. Shortly after his father's death, Percy's mother drove her car into a river and also died, a loss Percy personally ruled a suicide.

After the death of both parents, Percy and his two brothers were sent to live in Greenville, Mississippi, with their father's cousin, William Alexander Percy, called "Uncle Will" by the three boys. Will Percy gladly took the boys in, exemplifying for them family loyalty and self-sacrifice. He was also a man cut from the cloth of regional stoicism, which compelled him to uphold Southern, class-based manners in an atmosphere of what he believed to be a dispossessed aristocracy. Stoicism didn't provide an antidote to Percy's feelings of alienation, so much so that his first essay published in 1956, "Stoicism in the South," scathingly addressed this ethos of Southern segregation. Still on an existential hunt, Percy turned to science and went on to pursue a career in medicine.

It was ultimately during Percy's battle with tuberculosis, contracted during an autopsy, that he found his true vocation.

While Percy was confined to his hospital bed with TB, he read the writings of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and became convinced that science could not explain his plight. Percy said in a 1972 *Firing Line* interview with William F. Buckley Jr. that “the scientific method cannot make a single statement about the individual man. ... It can only describe man so far as he is with other people.” After discovering that science could not settle his unease, Percy diverted from his path in medicine and eventually settled down in a suburb of Louisiana, where he began his career as a writer. His first novel, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award.

Shouldering a burden of family suicide may have laid the foundation for Percy’s existential literary tone, although he didn’t care for the existentialist label. In a 1978 interview at his home in Covington, when asked to describe his Catholic existentialism in a few sentences, Percy replied that it was defined by his view of man apart from being only a consumer and organism. It’s the warped, solely scientific view of the human person that Percy believed leads to destruction, the kind repeatedly seen in the twentieth century. Percy is often called a prophet of modern times for recognizing the danger in those worldviews that denigrate the value of the human person. Instead, Percy affirmed, man is made in the image of God, and it’s his search for meaning among the ruins here on earth that drives him toward various worldviews.

Day Two: Life in the “malaise”

One of many works by Percy that highlights this search is the novel *Love in the*

Ruins, an apocalyptic and comedic examination of modern discontentment in what Percy aptly named the “malaise.” On the morning of the second day of the festival, I attended a lecture on *Love in the Ruins*, held in Temple Sinai and led by Colin H. Messer, chair and professor of English at my *alma mater*, Grove City College. The lecture was a lively commentary on Percy’s view of the world as presented in the novel, written from the perspective of “a bad Catholic at a time near the end of the world.” Through the events of the novel, Percy surveys modern times with a shrewd eye and portrays the American suburban life as a tragedy. “The tragedy has to do with banality, the loss of meaning,” said Messer. He ended his lecture in praise of a sacramental life, a joy found in the ordinary fellowship and tasks of the everyday, a note on which Percy redeems his “bad Catholic” character.

What readers, myself included, often miss about Percy’s characters at the close of his novels is their redemption. At first hopelessly trapped in what they believe to be an ordinary and banal life, they discover the meaning of the human person and the value of seemingly menial pleasures; this is the joy Percy found. Jessica Hooten Wilson, the associate professor of creative writing at John Brown University, told me that “for Percy,

if you’ve gotten to the end and have decided to live the everyday life ... you have not given up.” She used Binx Bolling, the primary character in *The Moviegoer*, as an example. After a glib throughout New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in hopes of being spiritually awakened from his dull, routine life as a stock broker, Bolling decides to settle down, get married, and become a doctor. “He’s not the person he was in the beginning, but it looks like it, because now he understands that he’s receiving something else, some taste of grace, while going through the complex participation of life,” Wilson said.

She also led a book discussion on Saturday. Gathered in a circle inside Grace Episcopal Church, Wilson sparked discussion among the 30-odd people there, breaking down Percy’s novel, *The Last Gentleman*. Although Percy’s novels are all quite different, written in different tones and even in different genres, there are a handful of his works which are similarly centered on characters who find themselves very obviously on “the search,” and the central character in *The Last Gentleman* is one of these. Wilson led an energetic discussion, although some of her questions seemed to stump the listeners as she asked for plot points and thematic explanations. Sometimes Percy subtly leaves the answers right under your nose.

The last literary event on Saturday featured a panel discussion between Percy’s daughter, Mary Pratt Percy Lobdell, and Huger Foote, the son of the late Shelby Foote, Civil War historian and lifelong friend of Percy. This event was a favorite of the festival-goers. Lobdell and Foote

told story after story of the memories they shared of their fathers, of their friendship, and growing up in the shadow of literary success. Shelby Foote and Walker Percy met as neighbors in Greenville, Mississippi, and afterwards were fast friends. Lobdell and Foote both remembered their fathers sweating over their writing. “My father would lock himself away in his study for hours and sometimes agonize over his writing,” Lobdell remembered. Both tears and laughter were shared during that hour.

Fellowship under the oaks

After all the panels and discussions had wrapped up, the progressive front porch tour and bourbon tasting began. Both festival attendees and locals gathered on several porches in St. Francisville’s historic district; although the early summer sun was beginning to set, it was still hot, even for Louisiana. Royal Street was filled with the sounds of clinking glasses and humming fans.

It was there that I was introduced to Philip Thompson, who partially credits Percy for changing the course of his life. He took me back to when he was a successful attorney, going through a sort of “existential crisis.” In 1990, after having been

“Percy’s writings spoke to all people and brought them into rich fellowship with each other.”

the campaign chair for his law partner's run for lieutenant governor of Georgia, Thompson decided one race was enough for him. "I realized it wasn't the life for me," he said. "So, I got out of politics and was adrift." It was at that time of vocational and spiritual questioning when he became terribly sick with pneumonia.

Confined to a bed (not unlike Percy), Thompson began reading Percy's books. The author's project of examining man's alienation resonated with Thompson. "We – including him, and me, and everybody else who lives in this modern American world – are stuck in the malaise, a very existential kind of term," he said. "But what he means is that we're stuck in a world of everydayness, whether it's scientism or a lot of other false paths." Thompson says that's why Percy quotes Kierkegaard on the nature of despair: "The true nature of despair is precisely this: It's the unawareness of being in despair." Percy compels his readers to ask life's ultimate questions and subtly presents them with the truth that lasting joy can never be found in the material world, but only in eternity. Thompson committed his life to Christ and afterward joined the faculty at the Aquinas Center of The-

ology at Emory University, where he is now the executive director and teaches the literature of Walker Percy.

On Saturday night, the bourbon crawl ended on Prosperity Street across from Grace Episcopal Church. The air cooled down, and everyone sat at a long table for boiled crawfish and craft beer. For several hours people there talked, and ate, and danced, almost until midnight. Percy's work didn't pertain only to people of one region, religion, culture, or race – his writings spoke to all people and brought them into rich fellowship with each other.

The Freyhan Foundation is currently using the money raised by Walker Percy Weekend to turn the old Freyhan School into an art center. "I would like to expand it and tell the story of what the Jewish population has done for our little town, especially along the lower Mississippi River," Nancy Vinci told me. Through the restoration project underway, the Freyhan School will be transformed into a museum and cultural center where people can learn more about the history of the community and participate in the arts. "Our town is special, and we've got to preserve that history," Vinci says

emphatically. "We can't throw it away. We've got to understand where we've come from."

While Percy's novels speak personally to those living in the South, he speaks truly to people of all walks of life. "My novels attempt to be an exploration of what it is to be a man, living in a particular time and a particular place," he told Buckley on *Firing Line*. "I'm exploring what it is to be human." This exploration of the meaning of life and the value and dignity of the individual person is the core of Percy's work. It was there at a table laden with crawfish and beer, and surrounded by a myriad of people that this became obvious; it's Walker Percy's humility, admitting his struggles and his questioning, that connects readers and brings them together in a place like St. Francisville. "Percy's ability to help us see our faults, that's key," Jessica Hooten Wilson told me. "Really, that's what Percy lets us do: to let go of the things we're not supposed to hold onto and hold onto the things that are good, that are lasting."

Caroline Roberts is a writer and producer of the "Radio Free Acton" podcast. [R&L](#)

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Photo right: Jerzy Popieluszko - By Andrej Iwanst - CC0/SASA

BLESSED FR. JERZY POPIEŁUSZKO (1947–1984)

Marcin Rzegocki

The Church always stands on the side of people who are victimized. Today, the Church stands on the side of those who have lost their freedom, whose conscience is being broken. ... Dedication to freedom is tightly knit with human nature and with mature national awareness.

—Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko

Blessed Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko helped keep the Polish people's spirit alive during the dark age of Communism, before being tortured and assassinated by the secret police. Fr. Popiełuszko was born in 1947 in the village of Okopy in northeastern Poland. In 1965, he enrolled in seminary in Warsaw. The next year the government enrolled him and his fellow seminarians in the army, where two years of harsh conditions would cause him lifelong health problems. In 1972, he was ordained a deacon, and one year later a priest. Between 1972 and 1980, he worked as a vicar. But in 1980, as his health worsened, he was appointed to pastoral work for doctors and other medical professionals. That August, he celebrated a Mass for striking steelworkers in Warsaw, marking the beginning of his pastoral engagement with the Solidarity movement. At the same time, Fr. Popiełuszko engaged in charity work for those in need: the poor, the sick, families of political prisoners, etc.

Beginning in February 1982, once a month he celebrated Masses for the motherland in Saint Stanislaus Kostka Church in the Żoliborz district of Warsaw. In his sermons, Fr. Popiełuszko spoke about true patriotism, liberty, faith, and truth. These services drew



ever-growing crowds from the capital and surrounding regions. They also attracted the attention of the Communist security services.

The state power apparatus intensely persecuted the young priest, aiming to intimidate him into changing his sermons. He experienced two burglaries at his apartment; his car was vandalized; he was framed and falsely arrested; and explosives were thrown into his house. He was incessantly surveilled and stalked by government officers. He came under attack from the Communist press. Yet in one of his sermons in 1983, he held out hope for reconciliation based on love and justice.

In 1984, just weeks before his death, Fr. Popiełuszko tied human dignity and freedom of conscience to the freedom to earn a living. "Justice dictates each to be granted the rights they are due – and thus, the right to

work in accordance with your profession and not be thrown out of work for your beliefs," he said.

On October 13, 1984, the Communists made their first attempt to kill Fr. Popiełuszko. Secret service officers tried to cause a fatal accident by throwing a stone at his car, but he avoided it. One week later, the priest was kidnapped, brutally beaten, and thrown into the Vistula River with a 23-pound bag of stones tied to his feet – while he was still breathing. His neck was tied with a rope so that any movement only tightened the knot. His body surfaced on October 30.

His funeral took place on November 3, 1984, drawing more than 250,000 people in a massive anti-regime demonstration. Fr. Popiełuszko was buried in the front yard of Saint Stanislaus Kostka church. Since then, his beloved parish has become a shrine of the Solidarity movement. His murderers never faced justice, but many years later, Cardinal Angelo Amato would say that Father Popiełuszko's death "was the beginning of a general conversion of hearts to the Gospel."

Indeed, in less than five years after the martyrdom of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, the Communist regime in Poland collapsed, part of a mutually reinforcing domino effect in other Central and Eastern European countries. No one who observed his life, or his death, could ever question that a divinely inspired love of freedom lay deep inside his heart.

Marcin Rzegocki is a Ph.D. student at the Warsaw School of Economics. **R&L**



ESSAY

Transhumanism: A Religion for Postmodern Times

Wesley J. Smith

We are witnessing the birth of a new faith. It is not a theistic religion. Indeed, unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, it replaces a personal relationship with a transcendent God in the context of a body of believers with a fervent and radically individualistic embrace of naked materialistic personal recreation.

Moreover, in contrast to the orthodox Christian, Judaic, and Islamic certainty that human beings are made up of both material body and immaterial soul – and that *both* matter – adherents of the new faith understand that we have a body, but what really counts is *mind*, which is ultimately reducible to mere chemical and electrical exchanges. Indeed, contrary to Christianity's view of an existing Heaven or, say, Buddhism's conception of the world as illusion, the new faith insists that the physical is all that has been, is, or ever will be.

Such thinking leads to nihilism. That's where the new religion leaves past materialistic philosophies behind, by offering adherents hope. Where traditional theism promises personal salvation, the new faith offers the prospect of *rescue* via radical life-extension attained by technological

applications – a postmodern twist, if you will, on faith's promise of eternal life.

This new religion is known as “transhumanism,” and it is all the rage among the Silicon Valley *nouveau riche*, university philosophers, and among bioethicists and futurists seeking the comforts and benefits of faith without the concomitant responsibilities of following dogma, asking for forgiveness, or atoning for sin – a foreign concept to transhumanists. Truly, transhumanism is a religion for our postmodern times.

Transhumanism makes two core promises. First, humans will soon acquire heightened capacities, not through deep prayer, meditation, or personal discipline, but merely by taking a pill, engineering our DNA, or otherwise harnessing medical science and technology to transcend normal physical limitations. More compellingly, transhumanism promises that adherents will soon experience, if not eternal life, then at least indefinite existence – in this world, not the next – through the wonders of applied science.

This is where transhumanism becomes truly eschatological. Transhumanist prophets anticipate a coming neo-salvific event known as the “Singularity” – a point in human history when the crescendo of scientific advances become unstoppable, enabling transhumanists to recreate themselves in their own image. Want to have the eyesight of a hawk? Edit in a few genes. Want to raise your IQ? Try a brain implant. Want to look like a walrus? Well, why not? Different strokes for different folks, don't you know?

Most importantly, in the post-Singularity world, *death itself will be defeated*. Perhaps, we will repeatedly renew our bodies through cloned organ replacements or have our heads cryogenically frozen to allow eventual surgical attachment to a different body. However, transhumanists' greatest hope is to eternally save their minds (again, as opposed to souls) via personal uploading into computer programs. Yes, transhumanists expect to ultimately live without end in cyberspace, crafting their own virtual realities, or perhaps, merging their consciousnesses with others' to experience multi-beinghood.

Transhumanists used to repudiate any suggestion that their movement is a form of, or substitute for, religion. But in recent

years, that denial has worn increasingly thin. For example, Yuval Harari, a historian and transhumanist from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told *The Telegraph*, “I think it is likely in the next 200 years or so *Homo sapiens* will upgrade themselves into some idea of a divine being, either through biological manipulation or genetic engineering by the creation of cyborgs, part organic, part non-organic.”

According to Harari, the human inventions of religion and money enabled us to subdue the earth. But with traditional religion waning in the West – and who can deny it? – he believes we need new “fictions” to bind us together. That's where transhumanism comes in:

Religion is the most important invention of humans. As long as humans believed they relied more and more on these gods, they were controllable. With religion, it's easy to understand. You can't convince a chimpanzee to give you a banana with the promise it will get 20 more bananas in chimpanzee Heaven. It won't do it. But humans will.

But what we see in the last few centuries is humans becoming more powerful, and they no longer need the crutches of the gods. Now we are saying, “We do not need God, just technology.”

Ha! The old stereotype of the bearded Christian fanatic in robe and sandals carrying a sign stating, “The end is nigh!” has been replaced by transhumanism proselytizers like author Ray Kurzweil (of Google fame) whose bestselling transhumanist manifesto is titled, *The Singularity is Near*.

I can't end this essay without highlighting an absolutely crucial distinction that must be drawn between transhumanism and orthodox faiths, particularly Christianity. *Christianity's highest ideal is love*. St. John the Evangelist wrote, “God is love.” Christ commanded Christians to “love one another as I have loved you.” Hence, believers understand that Christian living requires clothing the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned, etc. Because, as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, when we do these things to “the least of these, you have done it unto Me.”

In contrast, *transhumanism's highest virtue is intelligence*, which is why increasing

human brain capacity is the movement's second most desired enhancement after defeating death. Thus, transhumanist entrepreneur Bryan Johnson was reported by the *New Scientist* as investing \$100 million to develop an implant to increase intelligence. "I arrived at intelligence," the story quoted Johnson as saying, because "I think it's the most precious and powerful resource in existence."

In all the transhumanist literature I have read, I have seen little interest in increasing the human capacity to love, beyond the most carnal understanding of that term. Perhaps that is because even crass materialists understand that love transcends firing neurons, bringing us as close as we are capable to expressing the divine. Indeed, it is no coincidence that an ancient theist gave us our most profound description of love:

If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

You won't find anything as deep, meaningful, and yes, intelligent as St. Paul's love discourse in any transhumanist manifesto. Indeed, even if we ultimately reengineer ourselves into post-humanity, until and unless we exponentially expand our capacity to love – which is a spiritual discipline, not a mechanistic endeavor – we will never become the creatures we long to be.

Wesley J. Smith is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism. 

ESSAY

The difference between pagan and Christian charity

Rev. Ben Johnson

Every year's end means that people of faith will be deluged with two things: wishes for a Happy New Year and appeals for charities of every conceivable variety. Americans gave \$390 billion to charity in 2016, nearly one-third of it in the month of December. For charities and their beneficiaries, the holiday spirit – and Americans' desire to lower their year-end tax bill – are a godsend. But ancient pagans had a different view of private, Christian almsgiving, which still holds important lessons for our day.

After centuries of persecution and repression, the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313. However, within a generation his nephew would try to restore paganism to the Roman Empire. Julian – remembered by historians as "Julian the Apostate" – came to the throne in 361 after rejecting his Christian baptism and celebrating the pagan rites that had not fully lost their hold on his subjects.

Julian tried to use all the powers of the state to launch a pagan revival. He organized a parallel, pagan priesthood based on the Church's diocesan model. He tried to use legal mechanisms to deny Christians their recently acquired equal rights. But he saw one obstacle above all preventing a return to the old ways: Christian charity.

He wrote a letter to the pagan high-priest Arsacius lamenting:

[I]t is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us. Teach those of the Hellenic faith to contribute to public service of this sort, and the Hellenic villages to offer their first fruits to the gods; and accustom those who love the Hellenic religion to these good works by teaching them that this was our practice of old.

With the letter, the emperor sent several thousand bushels of grain and pints of wine to be distributed by the priests, at public expense.

It had to be this way, since paganism had produced no charity, nor any compulsion to offer it. In the Greco-Roman world, charity was given to enhance the giver's reputation and make others beholden to him. Since the poor could not return the favor, they received little charity. (Contrast this spirit with St. Luke 14:12-14.)

There was more than philanthropy behind Julian's tax bequest. One of the "fundamental issues" motivating Julian's social policy "is that of patronage" wrote two experts, Walter Roberts of the University of North Texas and Michael DiMaio Jr. of Salve Regina University. "Julian feared that Christian practices were causing many citizens to look to other sources than the emperor for protection and security." As far as Julian was concerned, the "emperor was supreme patron, and it was his duty to provide for his clients, the citizens of society."

Furthermore, they explained, the emperor wanted this pagan "charity" to create a new government bureaucracy, cementing both his power and his citizens' undivided loyalty:

Julian wished various societal elites to function as intercessors between himself and the broader society at large. Julian wished for his religious officials to serve in this same capacity, and it infuriated him that Christian leaders were usurping a role that was rightly his to bestow.

Julian reigned only two years (361-363), and Emperor Jovian reestablished Christian rights during his eight-month tenure. However, one may hear his view of Christian charity echo through the ages – and into contemporary times.

Most recently it surfaced in the public debate over the HHS mandate, requiring

employers to provide birth control, sterilization, and potentially abortifacient drugs to their employees. In August 2011, the Obama administration released its four-fold test to determine whether an organization qualified for a religious exemption. Two of the criteria state that the group's "purpose" is "[t]he inculcation of religious values," and – most importantly – that "[t]he organization serves primarily persons who share the religious tenets of the organization."

That is, religious institutions should support their own, not "ours, as well."

By no means is this to assert that supporters of the Affordable Care Act are pagans. However, the authors of the HHS ordinance consciously marginalized religious institutions in favor of state redistribution and control. Statists demanding their subjects' loyalty inevitably lash out at the Church, as they did during the Bolshevik Revolution, the French Revolution, the Spanish Revolution, and countless other times – often under the guise of seizing ecclesiastical property to benefit "the poor." In reality, these only enrich party apparatchiks. Both the Church and the state look at society and repeat the words of Jesus: "This is my body."

To be sure, faithful Jews and Christians care for their co-religionists, but both reach beyond their own membership. Christianity infused philanthropy with a new sense of universal brotherhood. After strongly defending the social conscience of pre-Christian Hellenism, the late Byzantine scholar Rev. Demetrios J. Constantelos noted that Christianity destroyed all cultural boundaries that would limit charity:

[I]n the early Christian societies of both the Greek East and the Latin West, philanthropia [love for mankind] assumed an integrated and far-reaching meaning, its application directed to the humblest and the poorest. Philanthropia extended to the underprivileged, as it proclaimed freedom, equality, and brotherhood, transcending sex, race, and national boundaries. Thus it was not limited to equals, allies, or relatives, or to citizens and civilized men, as was most often the case in other ancient societies.

The ancient writer Lucian of Samosata satirized Christians in his "Passing of Peregrinus" for being so charitable that they became easy marks for liars and charlatans. But any attempt to limit Christians to "their own poor" is at war with Christian anthropology, which sees all people as brethren demanding our concern.

For people of faith, almsgiving is a duty, a privilege, an opportunity to respect the image of God that resides in every human being irrespective of race, class, nationality, or any other characteristic. For the ancient pagans – and some dedicated to expanding the size and scope of government – serving the poor is a battle for supremacy, power, and obedience. In the one case, the benevolent voluntarily offer alms as the tangible fruits of overflowing love, for the benefit of the receiver, and to the glory of Almighty God. In the other, the state redistributes wealth from less-favored to more-favored groups, to leverage the votes of key voting constituencies, to the benefit of the wealthy politicians who run the system.

No one, least of all people of faith, should forget the difference between Christian and pagan views of charity – nor the unspoken motives behind them.

Rev. Ben Johnson is an Eastern Orthodox priest and managing editor of Religion & Liberty. [R&L](#)

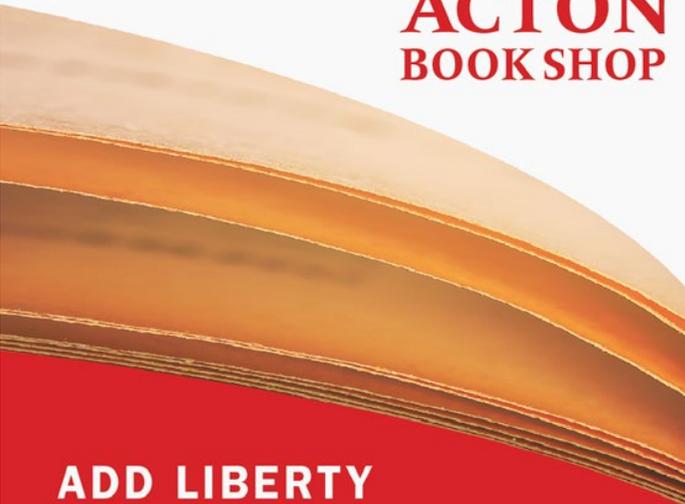
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of that process – a living connection to God through traditional worship – would lead, not just to a consensus on issues, but to the creation of a culture that can actually replace (rather than just battle) secularism.

Building on Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World*, Guroian argues that secularism separates all things, even sacred ones, from their source and turns them into objects. Groups then argue with one another about what criteria to use to evaluate these objects to find their virtue. Conservative Christians living in a secular culture become just one of many groups, endorsing what they consider to be better, more traditional and correct evaluations than their opponents. If their tactics and rhetoric are good, their standards of virtue may dominate for a while. But they will have succeeded at the expense of the truth and will have further reified the dominance of the heresy of secularism, because they themselves will have removed holy concepts from their contexts for utilitarian reasons. (See especially chapter 4.) This is a powerful observation that helps us understand why we seem to be losing the cultural war.

There are others who understand this, see the implications, and are enjoying some success in fighting back. Jordan Peterson is one of them. Peterson first won acclaim through his public refutation of state-enforced political correctness (and especially new gender pronouns), but he seems to have known that even victory in this domain would have been insufficient. Rather than turning this into a battle of competing evaluations, even one as useful and winnable as the value of social cohesion and of tradition over feelings, Peterson used his acclaim to help us reconnect the objects – and their proper evaluation – to their proximate source: traditional Judeo-Christian mythology.

Peterson's YouTube series "The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories" goes through the major events and ideas of the Bible from Genesis onward and describes the time-tested wisdom they reveal about mankind, the world, and meaning – as well as how the society based on this wisdom created the most prosperous, good, and noble civilization in the history of mankind. This

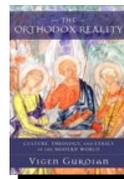
BOOK

A way back from secularism

Review of *The Orthodox Reality: Culture, Theology, and Ethics in the Modern World* (Baker Academic 2018).

Reviewed by Rev. Anthony Perkins

These are difficult times that divide Christians from their neighbors and from one another. In large part this is because we do not agree on how to relate with secular culture and which parts of it, if any, can be blessed. Eastern Orthodox theologian and ethicist Vigen Guroian's new analysis of secularism and how it insulates us from the power of the Gospel is timely and spot on. We can look to his work, and especially the collection of essays in *The Orthodox Reality: Culture, Theology, and Ethics in the Modern World* (Baker Academic, 2018), to see where he comes down on each of the major issues. He is, for example, pro-life, pro-traditional marriage and family, and pro-reestablishment of communion between East and West. But his views on specific issues are less important than understanding the process he used to arrive at them. His main point is that the widespread application



is hardly novel. Hundreds of thousands of churches in America offer Bible study classes that teach similar lessons every week. What is novel is Peterson's reach. This video series has millions of views, has bolstered the confidence of many conservatives, and is especially popular with millennial men, a demographic traditional institutions have found hard to connect with. His success demonstrates that people are hungry for meaning and are willing to look to religion for answers. Peterson's work is good, but it is not enough.

The Orthodox Reality explains why Peterson's approach won't succeed unless it is grafted onto or leads people towards something deeper. Secularism does not just objectify ideas like marriage, sexuality, and virtue; it is equally capable of objectifying – and thus dismissing – cultures and the mythologies that gave rise to them. Peterson's approach is the best that secularism can offer, but as long as it works from within its confines, it cannot replace it. The problem is not just that the "good" of something in Peterson's worldview is defined by its fitness or utility rather than its intrinsic value. The problem is that it allows for no living connection with anything really true or good. His agnostic approach to mythology and virtue is politically useful to the extent it privileges Western culture and the Judeo-Christian symbols and stories that are linked to them (these are "specifications of the symbolical ontology of creation," as Guroian describes them on p. 135), but Guroian convincingly makes the case that they cannot heal, bless, and perfect mankind or the cosmos if they are cut off from their true Source.

The answer to the problems of our day is not just a restored commitment to the traditional Western canon and mythology, but a commitment to experiencing God through the traditional liturgical worship and sacraments of the Church, and allowing that experience to enliven us and the culture that rises up around us. The strength and beauty of Guroian's theology is that it, like him, has been formed by that very experience. He writes in the chapter on marriage that, just as the Eucharist reveals the "epiphanic character" of the bread and wine that are the "natural symbols of flesh and blood," so to the service of

marriage reveals the unique capacity of a male and female couple to become "one Christic and ecclesial being." He is not proof-texting the marriage ceremony to support a traditional understanding of marriage. He is indeed expressing a truth that a life of worship and prayer has made obvious to him (and that is available to all who have allowed themselves to be reformed through their own immersion).

Similarly, when he points to the unique sacramental communion of traditional marital "coupling," he is less arguing against cultural norms of fornication and sodomy in favor of biblical morality than he is describing a specific example of how God works in the world to perfect His children. Unmarried sex may feel good, but Guroian is trying to help us understand that feelings and strong opinions, even ones derived from an abstract commitment to traditional morality, are poor substitutes for a connection with the living God. Without that connection and the true love it sustains, even the perfect words of "men and angels" are as a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1).

Guroian does a great job describing how we fell into this heretical rut in Part I and II of *The Orthodox Reality*. There was a time when we knew that God was with us. The Holy Bible and tradition, Christianity's symbols and stories, the concepts of virtue, asceticism, and morality; all these were the words He used to voice His love for us, a love that He shared with us continually through worship and mystery/sacrament. As a happy marriage fills a home with peace and hospitality that increases and shares its love (p. 145), so our joyful union with Him created a culture that deepened the awesome reality of His presence. As the rituals of home life manifest the harmony between those who live there and give it shape, so our connection with God through "prayer and sacrament" allowed us to "remember and regain" the "divine culture" that was lost to us through the Fall (p. 15). Secularism ruined this. For a while we missed this ruination. We celebrated the way Christian concepts, after having been liberated from their "religious" context, became universal, not anticipating how this liberation would eventually allow people to attack Christian institutions with the very concepts Christianity gave them as they

redefined them to meet their needs (pp. 59, 129).

Guroian points out that Orthodoxy, with its insistence on the permanence of God's uncreated energies pervading creation, has been somewhat immune to the encroachment of secularism (pp. 46-47), but also notes that the Orthodox have squandered the evangelical opportunity this provides through ethnophyletism and a decrease in the kind of commitment to creedal truths that would keep their spirituality from descending into syncretic mysticism and therapeutic deism along with the rest of the world (p. 49). Because we have been defined by secularism, we are less interested in what worship is than what it does, and thus we disable the vehicle of our deliverance.

So what is the answer? Guroian is insistent that responding to secularism is fraught with danger (a special danger for converts – a very American fortress mentality – is found on p. 76). Nor can we hope to bless its more noble parts the way we have done with other cultures. The best answer he gives in *The Orthodox Reality* is the response Dostoyevsky gave to the penetrating attacks of the middle brother, Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a response he gives in the witness of the younger brother, Alyosha. Alyosha did not give a point-by-point refutation of Ivan's arguments, nor did he attack him or refuse to live with him. Rather, his actions provided "a religious vision that refute[d] Ivan's assertion that the love that Christ taught is neither possible for human beings nor triumphant over evil and death."

Rather than trying to fight a losing battle to reclaim the lost Christian culture of pre-Enlightenment Europe, Guroian argues that Christians need to create a new organic version: an Orthodox-Catholic culture that grows out of our complete dedication to our mutual, sacramental, credal, and evangelical life in Christ. This book may not provide a complete guide on how to do this, but it is a prophetic description of what secularism has done and the destruction that awaits us if we further isolate ourselves from the Source.

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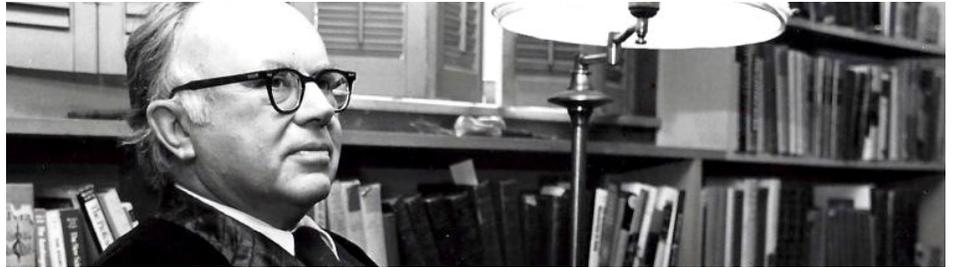
The notion of shared values on both sides of the Atlantic has received new attention. Leaders like French socialist president François Hollande cite “democracy, freedoms and the respect of every individual” as key values. But what about religious liberty, the breakdown of the welfare state, advancing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

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ACTON’S RUSSELL KIRK CONNECTION

Rev. Robert A. Sirico



This year, we celebrate the centenary of the birth of Russell Kirk, a member of the Acton Institute’s Board of Advisors from its founding until his death in 1994. His astute analyses ranged from his doctoral thesis – which became *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (later editions were expanded to include T.S. Eliot) – to an economics primer, ghostly fiction, literary and political biographies, and much, much more; all worth reading.

Eventually, Kris Mauren and I had the good fortune of meeting one of the twentieth century’s great minds as we set out to assemble the Acton Institute’s Board of Advisors. I cannot recall the first time I met Russell or even the location, but I do remember I was quite familiar with his landmark magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*, as well as his byline in *National Review* and elsewhere. Before too long, Russell’s daughter became Acton’s first receptionist, and I became a semi-regular guest at his ancestral home, Piety Hill, and his library, both of which are located in the mid-Michigan village of Mecosta. Russell and his bride, Annette, were also frequent guests at Acton events. In fact, his very last speech was given at Acton in 1994.

I didn’t always agree with Kirk – I still maintain his essay “The Chirping Sectaries” erroneously gives short shrift to libertarians, and his last speech wasn’t exactly a hagiography of our institute’s namesake, Lord Acton. But only the most callow of individuals would allow such minor cavils to stand in the way of fully appreciating Kirk’s massive body of work. (Some of his previously unpublished observations are still working their way into print, as attested by the release this year of a major volume of his correspondence with friends, family, and fellow luminaries.)

We certainly appreciated our access to Russell and easily found common ground. Specifically, his textbook, *Economics: Work and Prosperity*, wonderfully encapsulates the free-market ideals the Acton Institute espouses. In this 1989 work, Kirk shows himself adept at explaining the basic principles of economics by employing biblical passages from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as fables, poetry, and philosophy. It’s a magnificent work that I highly recommend for those seeking to instruct young people in the basics of economics, as well as those adults interested in a remedial education in the “dismal science.” For example, he wisely notes, “It is better to be relatively poor in an efficient economy than to be absolutely poor in an effective economy with goods of low quality at high prices.” He continues: “[A] society with an efficient economy can afford to help its poorer citizens economically through voluntary charities or governmental assistance. Competition, in short, makes possible a better standard of living for everyone in a prosperous society.”

This paragraph, published the year before Acton opened its doors, presciently summarizes much of what our organization sought to accomplish from its beginning. It is with tremendous humility that I remember Russell Kirk on the 100th anniversary of his birth, thanking him for helping to forge the path that the Acton Institute continues to blaze. He is but one of the giants upon whose shoulders we stand.

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is president and co-founder of The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. [R&L](#)

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