

FIRST THINGS

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ENGINES OF DESTRUCTION

Two pivotal developments will transform the West. One is mass migration, which, in tandem with declining birth rates, is producing demographic change in Europe and North America. The other is the green transition and the massive amount of capital allocated to build a new economy. The first erodes the quality of life for ordinary people in the West. The second is likely to produce a lower standard of living. Both dynamics are overseen and ideologically justified by today's elites. The dissatisfaction and disorder they will create will put great stress on our political and cultural establishments. In all likelihood, the coming years will see the West pivot toward a post-democratic era as elites clamp down on populist dissent and nullify electoral results that run counter to their plans.

On various occasions during the past decade, I've participated in debates about immigration. I'm not "anti-immigration" (although anyone who advocates reduction of the present influx is invariably called that). The ability to attract and assimilate immigrants has been a great American strength. But what has struck me in these debates is the obtuse mentality of those who oppose my calls for restraint on immigration. I point out that the non-native-born are reaching a historic high of nearly 15 percent of the total population, and that immigration rates are accelerating. At some point (20 percent? 25 percent?), won't the country become culturally incoherent? In response, my interlocutors insist that the country is already multicultural, and imply that it would be better if it were even more diverse. They rarely allow that there can or should be *any* limits to how many can arrive. I point out that we should discriminate among those we welcome, partly on the basis of their potential for easy assimilation. One need only to look to France or Sweden to see that large-scale Muslim immigration presents more significant challenges than does the arrival of Christians from Latin America. Again, my interlocutors refuse to make such determinations, often saying (in so many words) that to do so amounts to a xenophobic sin.

This stance baffles me. Is it so difficult to see that cultural continuity and social unity are essential common goods? And that demographic change often threatens both? Cultural continuity and social unity are not the be-all and end-all for healthy society. We also cherish freedom, dynamism, and hospitality, which along with other goods can run against continuity and unity. But those in charge seem to have lost any sense of the trade-offs and of the need to correct course when things go awry.

In *Return of the Strong Gods*, I outlined the development of an “open society” consensus after World War II. In its initial stages, this consensus endorsed a proper balance of dynamism and stability, of individual freedom and communal belonging, of welcoming strangers and taking care of one’s own. But even then the “openness” imperative had the upper hand, and as time went on the balance was lost. The triumph of “openness” has become ever more evident over the past three decades, along with the punitive monitoring of dissent. Those in positions of cultural power never miss an opportunity to denounce “nativism” and “xenophobia.”

The openness-is-always-best mentality dominates our society. Politically speaking, the Biden administration has every reason to take firm measures to tighten the border with Mexico and curtail illegal crossings. Doing so would deprive Donald Trump of one of his leading issues and go a long way toward defusing populism. But the administration refuses. Nor will Britain and other European governments stop illegal migrant inflows, which are given the patina of legality under the infinitely elastic notion of “asylum,” which in practice accords nearly everyone who comes ashore the right to stay.

Contemporary Christian leaders baptize the openness-is-always-best mentality. Catholic social teaching states: “People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.” Like “asylum,” this “right” receives expansive interpretation, so much so that in the eyes of ecclesiastical eminences anyone from a poor country enjoys a “right” to go to a richer country. In a fashion typical of a great deal of recent Christian thinking about migrants, Pope Francis assimilates the vocation of the Church as a universal institution that welcomes all persons to the nature and purpose of the nation, which has a duty to promote the good of its own citizens first and foremost. As a result, Francis invariably urges a spirit of “welcome” and never acknowledges the need to restrict the influx of newcomers. *Gaudium et Spes* defines a right to one’s own culture. Apparently, that right does not apply to those in the West. The Catholic Church is by no means unique. Many Christian denominations endorse the functional equivalent of open borders.

Recently, the Sunak government in Great Britain negotiated to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. A panel of five judges on the UK supreme court unanimously struck down the

agreement, the House of Lords signaled that it would block renewed attempts to implement the policy, and the BBC wailed about the grievous injustice of such a plan. No doubt an American president would face similar pushback in the form of lawsuits, judicial injunctions, and a storm of outrage from every corner of elite opinion.

The existence of a vast and effective apparatus that nullifies efforts to stem immigration suggests that our power elite either wants mass immigration, or—and to my mind this is a major factor—its members fear being ranged among the “nativists.” As a result, elite-driven policies clash with the outlook of the general public and fuel populism. Polling in Europe and America suggests that voters want fewer newcomers. This desire runs counter to the “openness” consensus. That consensus regards the desire to restrict immigration as pathological, a sign of “xenophobia” and “fear of difference.” It would therefore be irresponsible and, indeed, immoral to acquiesce in the popular will.

Again, Christian leaders often baptize this nullification of the popular will. When Belarus cynically massed Muslim migrants on its border with the European Union, Jean-Claude Cardinal Hollerich denounced the Polish and Lithuanian decisions to close their borders. Hollerich repeated Pope Francis’s claim that EU borders were becoming “a huge cemetery.” In effect, the Vatican sides with Muslim migrants against the residents of formerly Christian Europe and echoes the rhetoric of the Rainbow Reich, for which open borders serve as a key dogma.

In *The Strange Death of Europe*, Douglas Murray recounts the history of immigration debates. In the late 1960s, polling indicated that a super-majority of British voters desired greater restrictions on immigration. Those restrictions never came about. Indeed, simply to call for them was denounced as racist. The pattern has been repeated in every decade, not only in Great Britain, but in most countries in the West. Voters want less demographic change; they always get more.

I don’t wish to gainsay the judgments of leaders who refrained from imposing limits on immigration. Without immigration over the past two generations, the low (now *very* low) birth rates among what one might call “legacy” Europeans might have caused severe labor shortages and economic decline. And without large-scale immigration perhaps the United States (which likewise now has low birthrates) would not have seen steady GDP growth. I’m willing to concede both possibilities. But of this I am certain: Happy talk about multiculturalism is mendacious. One does not need an advanced degree in sociology to recognize that wave after wave of newcomers puts a strain on social coherence and communal trust.

That strain falls on Fishtown (Charles Murray's label for native-born, working-class America) rather than Belmont (home of the upper end of society, where one finds lawn signs announcing "No Human is Illegal"). A high concentration of recent immigrants undermines neighborhood solidarity, reduces school performance, and breaks down the already fragile political coalitions that serve the interests of non-rich American citizens. Meanwhile, those who endure these declines in quality of life are subjected to pious sermons about the wonderful benefits of "diversity," a project that rarely includes them. (The Trump-supporting grandchild of a Mexican immigrant does not contribute to "diversity.") And the children of those harmed by mass immigration are educated to believe that their country is inherently racist, nativist, and otherwise unworthy, while elites clothe themselves in the new virtues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which are seen to provide legitimacy for wealth, power, and privilege.

Perhaps the ideology of multiculturalism has staying power. Anti-Western pedagogy is designed to reduce loyalty to the West, a necessary step to clear the way for the utopian dream of multiculturalism, a society without a center, a way of life with no unifying vision other than the rainbow promise. To a striking degree, median voters throughout the West have been docile before this enterprise. Nevertheless, it beggars belief that the great mass of citizens in Western countries will calmly accept the cultural (and therefore political) transformations of their societies under the relentless pressure of demographic change. The recent and dramatic electoral success of Geert Wilders (a figure reviled by Western elites for decades) in the Netherlands suggests that voters are turning against the openness-is-always-best mentality.

The Green Transition

A recent publication by Boston Consulting Group estimates that an investment of \$37 trillion will be needed by 2030 to finance the green transition in energy production. That's roughly the entire U.S. federal budget every year. With global GDP running at \$100 trillion, the expenditure will amount to 6 percent of global output per annum.

These are huge numbers. Of course, "will be needed" and "will actually be allocated" are not the same thing. Many note that "net zero" (making the entire global economy carbon neutral) is a goal that cannot be achieved anytime soon, certainly not by 2030 or 2040. But it won't be for lack of trying. To stimulate green energy investment, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act authorized an expansive tax credit scheme that researchers estimate will cost more than \$1.2 trillion over the next eight years. California and other states have imposed draconian measures. (California will prohibit the sale of new internal-combustion-engine cars by 2035, Vermont by 2030.) Though these restrictions do not spend tax money, they impose huge costs that include increasing electricity

supply and transmission capacity, and multiplying charging stations—in effect, building an entirely new energy infrastructure.

I could go on. In just a few years, the green transition machine has grown to gigantic proportions, and it grinds forward. But instead of itemizing the costs, let me make some straightforward observations.

We presently have an economy based largely on carbon molecules, which are super-efficient storage units for energy. Carbon-based energy is durable and does not degrade with time. Unaffected by heat and cold, it is easy to transport. Over nearly two centuries, we have built a system of energy production, distribution, and use based on carbon. Sunk costs are in the tens of trillions.

I do not dispute that carbon-based energy has negative “externalities,” as the technocrats say. Pollution is a problem, and perhaps the consumption of energy in this form causes climate change. I wish only to make two simple points: We have this system; it works very well. The green transition will not improve upon the carbon-based system; it will replace it.

The very best outcome, as far as I can tell, is that the new, carbon-neutral system will work as well as the old one. This means that, in the most optimistic scenario, over the course of a decade or more we will spend six percent of global GDP per year in order to get the efficiency, productivity, and consumer satisfaction that we presently have.

Count me among those who doubt that we will get the best outcome, or even an only slightly worse one. I get that wind is free. But batteries, transmission lines, transformers, and the rest of the non-carbon-based system are more complicated and less diversified than the elements of the system we currently have. The new system will be subject to more frequent failure, which means it will require expensive measures to ensure reliability. Moreover, every system has negative externalities. The disposal of batteries and toxic rare earth metals required for solar and wind energy may prove a far greater threat to public health than nuclear waste storage.

I’m not an economist. But my inexpert mind has difficulty seeing how spending trillions of dollars to create a new energy system that merely replaces what we have (perhaps with less convenience and reliability) won’t make everything more expensive. (Part of the green transition will be paid for by government subsidies, but energy consumers will bear most of the costs.) And as huge sums are spent in this effort, won’t the infrastructure we take for granted deteriorate due to underinvestment? In short: Aside

from those who have their snouts in the trough of money being spent on the green transition, the entire effort, which we are told is a civilizational imperative, is very likely to cause a decline in the standard of living for those in the most developed and carbon-dependent part of the world. Which is to say, us.

As is the case with immigration, in matters of climate policy the Francis pontificate sides with elites. In *Laudate Deum*, a recent apostolic exhortation, the Holy Father dismisses dissent from today's environmental orthodoxy, suggesting that doubts about the wisdom of the green transition reflect the West's (and especially America's) selfishness. To implement unpopular green policies, he calls for "more effective world organizations," a notion that warms the hearts of oligarchs like Bill Gates, who are eager to impose "fact-based" solutions on a supposedly ignorant general population that can't be trusted to vote in the right way. For all the talk about going "to the peripheries," I'm convinced that historians will describe the Francis pontificate as an attempt to turn Rome into a chaplaincy for the global elite.

Demographic change has been ongoing, and the West has developed ideological explanations for why the challenges it poses are really blessings. (Diversity is our strength!) We're only beginning to embark on the massive experiment of remaking the energy foundations of our economy. It is an endeavor that not only will be more expensive than present estimates say, but also is unlikely to attain its stated goals. It's hard to imagine the degree of popular anger that will be caused by the toxic combination of declining living standards with constant calls for redoubled efforts requiring still more expenditure, regulation, and restriction. Meanwhile the targets will invariably be delayed. The great cause of carbon neutrality will be reframed and rebranded. The climate catastrophe never arrives, but as the non-elite citizens of the West face declining standards of living a political catastrophe very likely will.

The Post-Democratic Future

A significant decline in fertility among the native-born combined with mass migration transforms a society. The green transition seeks to remake the economy of the developed world on a scale that would make Stalin blush. If someone had told me thirty years ago that the Best and the Brightest (as well as the Righteous and the Pious) were willing to embark on both projects at once, I'd have called that person mad. The trajectory of the West is all the more insane because these disruptive enterprises are taking place against the background of the severe erosion of social capital. Faith and family no longer provide reliable anchors. Social media short-circuit the old authorities that once formed public opinion. Anxiety and addiction are on the rise. Trust and steady

habits of thrift and self-reliance are waning. Fewer forces exist to stabilize the body politic at a time when we're certain to need them.

I'm not saying that we're heading toward a populist uprising, the electoral success of Wilders and others notwithstanding. We are living in a paradoxical moment. Polling suggests widespread distrust of established institutions and dissatisfaction with the status quo. This unhappiness can take radical forms. Some on the left speak of "settler colonialism," a notion that, like the 1619 Project, makes the United States a country without moral legitimacy. Some on the right argue that the "deep state" and other gears in the machine of governance are so thoroughly captive to progressive dogma and technocratic interests that we must contemplate the possibility of a "Red Caesar" who will restore popular control.

Yet for all the uproar, our politics remains stuck in deep ruts, epitomized by the prospect of another contest between Trump and Biden. There are legal tools that can be used to block populists. (Wilders has been prosecuted several times; in Germany, *Alternative für Deutschland* is under investigation and may be declared an illegal party; the day may come when the European Court of Human Rights declares unwanted election results a violation of human rights.) The technological methods of social control grow more powerful and more invisible—and more appealing to Western elites. During the pandemic, the general population submitted to radical measures dictated by technocrats, and they did so long after it was evident that these measures were as foolish as they were futile. And then there's the demographic fact that very low fertility rates mean that the ranks of angry young men, the traditional bearers of pitchforks and other instruments of populist violence, are thin, and those who exist are numbed by drugs and demoralized by pornography. Electoral upsets are likely, but violent uprisings against the status quo are not. People seem content to register their anger in the polling booth rather than march in the streets. (The riots in Dublin in late November may indicate that I underestimate the likelihood of violence.)

Though I cannot predict future events, I'm reasonably confident that the next few years will not be easy. Today's power elite is characterized by a curious combination of arrogance and fecklessness. The arrogance hides behind claims of necessity (We have only a few years left to avoid climate catastrophe!), as our leadership class plunges ahead with a massive transformation of the global economy. The fecklessness is disguised as idealism (*Wir schaffen das!*), which puts the sheen of righteousness on our elite's failure to address the factors driving disruptive demographic change. (Space does not allow me to address the West's obeisance to the Rainbow Reich and its ideology of infertility, a connection recognized by the Hungarian government, which has thereby

brought upon itself the unending opprobrium of all the Good People in Brussels and Washington.)

This combination of self-sure technocracy and cowardly leadership is likely to cause Western elites to redouble their commitments to the green transition and multiculturalism, even as conditions worsen. Emergency after emergency will be declared. (See Russell A. Berman, “State of Emergency,” June/July 2022.) Dissent will be squelched, as was done during the Covid lockdowns. If past performance is any indication, Rome will support these measures, and progressive Christians will cheer them as paving the way for the realization of the Sermon on the Mount.

In my estimation, the West is poised to make a very different kind of transition than the one John Kerry urges upon us. This transition will take us into the post-democratic age in which men shorn of all belonging tremble before the uncertainties of life and an establishment of managers and therapists promises them safety, security, and affirmation, if they will but submit. We’re already partway to that destination. (See Matthew B. Crawford, “The Rise of Antihumanism,” August/September 2023.)

I don’t wish to demoralize readers. In the first place, I could be wrong in my assessments of demographic change and the green transition. And perhaps populist politicians will succeed in winning elections and provide sane, responsible leadership. I do not pretend to be a prophet. Moreover, even if I am correct, we need to remember that the Lord never promised auspicious economic, cultural, or political circumstances. Rather, he created and sustains a world that is resplendent with a beauty that transcends our foibles and pratfalls. And he gave us hearts capable of great loves that both uplift and console.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ Tyler Austin Harper is a young comp-lit professor at Bates College, and (no surprise) a leftist. Here’s what he has to say about recent decisions by the University Board of Governors at the University of North Carolina.

This is what we’re witnessing—the dismantling of public higher ed in conservative states—and we’ve created the conditions for what’s going on at UNC. How did anyone think we could get away with being nakedly ideological for years without any chickens coming home to roost?

Universities have always been tacitly left-leaning and faculty have always been openly so, but institutions have never been this transparently, officially

political. Almost every single job ad in my field [and] related fields this year has some kind of brazenly politicized language.

An example. Here's language from a current lit job ad: "We see this position as building on recent hiring in the English department in decolonial and anti-racist pedagogies and practices as well as a recent cluster hire in research related to diversity, equity, and inclusion."

Imagine if a public university job ad instead read: "We see this position as building on recent hiring in the English department in traditionalist pedagogies and practices as well as a recent cluster hire in research related to pro-life ethics, nationalism, and family values."

*If you lived in a blue state and your public universities were advertising jobs seeking scholars who promote family values and nationalist pedagogies, you would *rightly* be having a meltdown and demanding representatives fix it!*

◆ In 2020, Black Lives Matter protests and riots induced panic in America's ruling class. Support for police receded; solicitude for criminals surged. We can now weigh the costs. Homicide rates increased significantly in 2020. They've peaked and fallen a bit since 2021. But that's not the full story. As Aaron Chalfin and Brandon del Pozo report in *Vital City* ("When City Streets Really Are War Zones"), young male residents of the poorest urban neighborhoods are two hundred and fifty times more likely to die of gunshot wounds than is the average American. Perhaps anxious to avoid today's political landmines, Chalfin and del Pozo avoid telling readers that these victims are overwhelmingly young black men. They focus on Garfield Park, Chicago (70 percent black), where a young man is three times more likely to die by firearm homicide than soldiers deployed in Afghanistan were to die in combat. Things are just as bad in the overwhelmingly black neighborhoods of Philadelphia, New Orleans, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, Memphis, and Kansas City. The virtue signaling of the upper-income white people who put BLM signs in their windows was a luxury that is still being paid for by the blood of poor blacks. Beware becoming the object of progressive solicitude.

◆ In his regular column in the *New Criterion*, "The media," James Bowman conveys a startling insight made by Helen Joyce, author of *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, which she articulated in an interview with Peter Boghossian:

Something you may not have thought of is that there are a lot of people who can't move on from [transgender ideology]. And that's the people who have transitioned their own children. So those people are going to be like the

Japanese soldiers who were on Pacific Islands and didn't know the war was over. They've got to fight forever. This is another reason why this is the worst, worst, worst social contagion that we'll ever have experienced. A lot of people have done what is the worst thing you could do, which is to harm their children irrevocably, because of [transgender ideology]. Those people will have to believe that they did the right thing for the rest of their lives, for their own sanity, and for their own self-respect. So they'll still be fighting, and each one of those people destroys entire organizations and entire friendship groups.

◆ *Sacred Architecture Journal* is a publication of the Institute for Sacred Architecture. A recent issue (Vol. 44) surveys Spanish-influenced churches in the Americas. It includes the recently completed Blessed Stanley Rother Shrine in Oklahoma City, designed in the Spanish Baroque style, as well as other newly constructed churches. Yes, Virginia, beautiful churches can be built in our own time. If you serve on a building committee, aspire to be the benefactor of new construction, or just like lovely churches, take out a subscription to *Sacred Architecture*.

◆ One omission from the survey of Spanish-influenced churches: Saint Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska. Designed by Omaha architect Thomas Rogers Kimball and built in the early decades of the twentieth century, the cathedral takes its inspiration from El Escorial, the vast sixteenth-century complex erected by Philip II in the foothills outside of Madrid.

◆ Late Friday night, November 3, in Indianapolis, Ruba Awni Almaghtheh rammed her vehicle into a building with a Star of David emblazoned on its front door. Arrested by police, she confessed, "Yes, I did it on purpose," and went on to say that her motive was to defend "her people back in Palestine." One problem: The building houses a local congregation of the Black Hebrew Israelites, a sect that rejects white Jews as agents of Satan. Ah, the ironies of a multicultural society.

◆ Bishop Robert Barron participated in the Synod on Synodality. He made some thoughtful observations about his experience on his teaching ministry's website, Word on Fire. The following caught my attention:

The primary mission of the Church is to declare the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to invite people to place themselves under his Lordship. This discipleship, to be sure, has implications for the way we live in the world, and it certainly should lead us to work for justice, but we must keep

our priorities straight. The supernatural should never be reduced to the natural; rather, the natural order should be transfigured by its relationship to the supernatural order.

Bishop Barron ends his reflections with strong criticism of the notion that we know more about sexuality than did our forebears and that these purported advances “require an evolution in moral teaching.” In my years as an Episcopalian I encountered this non sequitur many times: handwaving about science in order to justify moral revisions that alter Christian norms to accommodate the sexual revolution.

◆ I foresee that the Francis pontificate will continue to host voices that urge relaxation of sexual norms, especially norms concerning homosexuality. For an explanation of why this is likely to be the case, readers can return to “A New Concordat?,” my January 2015 Public Square. In that column I observed that in the 1930s the Church was unable to maintain a clear witness against Nazism. The pressures to accommodate and collaborate were too powerful. The same holds for the sexual revolution and today’s ascendant Rainbow Reich, which demands compliance with its “inclusive” dictates. Pope Francis is an enigmatic and often unpredictable character. Nevertheless, I predict that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Western Europe (and, perhaps, in the United States, although to a lesser extent) will accommodate itself to the Rainbow Reich in more open ways than it currently does. The LGBTQ vocabulary will be adopted. Collaborationists such as Fr. James Martin will be championed and rewarded. Those who resist the Rainbow Reich (data show that younger clergy in America are solidly orthodox on this and other issues) will be censured as “backward-looking” and “preoccupied with sexual issues” at the expense of social justice. This prospect fills me with sadness. The Rainbow Reich has profoundly disordered the male–female dance. It is a regime of infertility and loneliness that seeks spiritual consolation in a never-ending campaign to topple taboos and liberate desire. A generation from now, intelligent people will look back and condemn the churches for their complicity.

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IDEALISTIC NIHILISM

We live in paradoxical times. Over the last two generations, college students, especially at top-ranking universities, have been educated to believe that there is no transcendence. Human beings are a bundle of instincts, they're told, or software in meat hardware, or some other reductive explanation. And yet utopian progressive goals are championed with great conviction and unstinting ardor. It's hard to square the circle. On the one hand the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities teach an implicit (and sometimes explicit) nihilism; on the other hand, activists tout revolutionary idealism. All truth is "socially constructed," but the postmodern mind somehow knows that the rainbow flag represents the best and noblest aspirations, not just for our society, but for the entire world.

Richard Rorty was a clear-minded and articulate spokesman for this strange combination of idealism and nihilism. In a 1994 essay, "A World Without Substances or Essences," he observed that a great deal of twentieth-century philosophy converged on theories of knowledge that were "anti-metaphysical" and "anti-foundational." On his account, there are no enduring anchors. We must use our minds to navigate the world without universals, without unchanging touchstones.

Rorty claims that the West has inherited a philosophical tradition that socializes us to respond with anxiety, even terror, when confronted by the reality that there are no "hard" truths, that there is nothing (*nihil*, hence *nihilism*) guaranteeing the truth of what we say and believe. In a word, Rorty asserts that the desire for transcendence is "socially constructed." (I would argue the opposite: The reaction of profound existential concern stems from our nature as rational animals—but let's leave that aside.) The gravamen of Rorty's essay (along with many others he wrote over the years) is to argue for a cheerful affirmation of the anti-metaphysical outlook. Nihilism is not an oppressive doctrine; it is a liberating one.

Rorty commends John Dewey, "who most clearly and explicitly set aside the goal common to the Greeks and German Idealists (accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality) in favour of the political goal of increasingly free societies and increasingly diverse individuals within them." Released from the fetters of truth, we are free to reshape and reform our lives, our societies, and even reality! Because Rorty's nihilism denies that there are essences, we are constrained by no metaphysical limits as to what can be done. Only our restricted resources and impoverished imaginations stand in the way. Education therefore adopts a twofold vocation. It must increase power, both technologically and politically. And it must break down the limits imposed upon

our imaginations by inherited cultural norms. Rather than helping us to know ourselves, the task of philosophy, Rorty insists, is to clear away impediments and provide us with tools to create better selves, and a better society.

Of course, “better” requires a measure. Rorty urges caution at this point. We must not be seduced back to the old approach, the one that seeks the truth of things. The way forward is through assertions, not arguments. (Rorty’s hero John Dewey warned about arguing against the unwanted conclusions of older traditions of philosophy, observing that it’s more effective to dismiss them as medieval, obscurantist, and authoritarian.) Liberal ideas become god terms, shimmering notions untethered to any particular criteria, plastic and available for whatever political use will bring “progress.” Rorty was troubled by the rise of anti-Western ideologies. Late in life, his jeremiads against the academic left made him a suspect character in university circles. But his intellectual and political children were only following through on the logic of his position. Barack Obama’s daughters add “diversity,” whereas a white kid from rural North Dakota does not. “Equity” amounts to whatever is required at the moment. “Inclusion” means privileging favored groups and downgrading the unfavored.

Meanwhile, the destruction of perceived impediments to “progress” gains momentum. The nihilism Rorty advocated emphasizes debunking and deconstruction. (He was an academic mandarin who wrote on canonical figures, but he never tired of announcing that the entire tradition of Western philosophy had been mistaken.) Over the last four decades, a combination of technocratic attitudes and postmodern theories has pulverized older traditions of transcendence in the humanities. I recently visited Harvard and urged a bright young student to take a class on Aristotle. “Nice idea,” he replied, “but the philosophy department does not offer one.” (His experience is not the final word. Postdoc Mariana Beatrice Noé offers a Spring 2024 class that assigns Aristotle; Professor James Doyle is offering a class on St. Augustine.)

Rorty’s nihilism is ascendant. For technocratic and political reasons, our educational culture no longer sustains pedagogies of transcendence. (See my recent lament, “The Great Forgetting,” November 2023.) For what I can see, this hasn’t made students happy. The lure of transcendence encourages powerful loves that anchor us in what we will not renounce or betray. It binds our hearts. But stability runs counter to what the market demands: flexible souls ready to pounce upon the main chance. The early Facebook slogan says it all: Move fast and break things. But transcendence thickens us, stiffens us, anchors us. Worst of all, it depoliticizes the life of the mind, turning us toward contemplation rather than action, a disposition that is “anti-progressive” and thus must be condemned. Recall the BLM mantra: “Your silence is violence.”

The rampant anti-Western ideology in higher education (and now in primary and secondary education) baffles the Baby Boomers. They took Western Civ classes decades ago. But for a younger person, the pivot away from the Western tradition seems natural. Why bother with old ideas, especially those that have funded today's status quo, which is full of injustice and suffering? Isn't it better to wipe the slate clean? Shouldn't we adopt an experimental approach to ethical and political matters? After all, the scientific method does not concern itself with outdated theories. Physics students don't read Johannes Kepler; biology students don't read Linnaeus, or even Darwin. Moreover, isn't it better to identify with the marginalized and oppressed, rather than with the West's foundational themes and figures? Hamas may employ regrettable methods, but they are not responsible for colonialism, systemic racism, transphobia, global warming, and the other sins of the West!

The same Baby Boomers imagine that campus progressivism will shipwreck on the hard realities of the economic laws of supply and demand. This is to misread the postmodern condition. Nihilism dovetails with capitalism. A denial of transcendence makes all things available for technological transformation and commodification. Daniel Bell's 1976 book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, detailed the ways in which the free-market system colonizes society, forming its members into desire-driven consumers and undermining older traditions of virtue. Far from being "anti-capitalist," Rorty's liberal nihilism provides an ideological justification for fusing progressive cultural politics with ever-expanding markets. Both politics and the markets destroy the impediments that stand in the way of our desire to remake ourselves, our society, and the world. They are joined in the conjugal union of "progress."

A friend recently lamented that young people lack a tragic sense. They frame complex realities in simplistic terms: oppressor/oppressed, privileged/excluded, unjust/just, guilty/innocent. "Exactly," I replied. "To be delivered from the tragedy of life is the great gift of nihilism." Released from the recalcitrant truth of the human condition, we are free to imagine a world that is uncomplicated, immaculate, and perfect. And not just to imagine. Nihilism eliminates the temptation to seek contemplation. Rorty hymned the new vocation of philosophy: "the making of a better future for ourselves, constructing a utopian, democratic society." The ancient nihilism of Lucretius counseled acceptance of things as they are; modern nihilism is an activist faith, ever on the march.

We need to recognize that nihilism preaches a gospel: There are no limits. Why not remake the relations of men and women so that all stereotypes are destroyed and perfect equality is achieved? Why not empower DEI bureaucrats to confect a society without discrimination? Such conditions have never been achieved in the past. But that's of no moment. We can dream big! Change sex? Defeat death? Do not allow reality to stand in the way of our dreams!

Nihilistic Idealism

As the postmodern outlook gathers itself for action—“making a better future”—Rorty’s cheerful, idealistic nihilism turns into something dark and dangerous. Recently, the Harvard Corporation stood behind the school’s president, Claudine Gay, when she came under fire for congressional testimony that seemed to minimize campus anti-Semitism, along with accusations of plagiarism. Christopher Rufo, Heather Mac Donald, and others have noted that Gay is a woman of mediocre academic attainment. But this observation misses the mark. In our time, making has supplanted knowing as the highest good for the life of the mind. Harvard’s trustees emphasize that she is the right person “to address the very serious societal issues we are facing.” Gay is not the academic leader of a truth-seeking institution; she is the moral leader of a revolutionary institution that is committed to transforming society—as Rorty put it, “constructing a utopian, democratic society.”

In this enterprise, those who do not share the progressive vision of “addressing the very serious societal issues” must be managed, and if they are truculent and stand in the way of progress, they must be destroyed. What possible reason could anyone have for resisting the construction of “a utopian, democratic society”? Who would object to a perfect regime of diversity, equity, and inclusion, or a view of male and female that allows individuals greater freedom to create themselves anew? The ideals born of nihilism admit of no debate. Objections are mere foot-dragging, motivated by hatreds, phobias, and other disorders of the (nonexistent) soul. Or, worse, resistance signals a revanchist political mentality, one that is “far-right” and “authoritarian.” No reasonable person can object to the suppression of such dangers!

At Harvard and elsewhere, it is very nearly impossible to be hired or receive tenure if you hold conservative social views. (Free-market purists and libertarians, both utopian in their own ways, are clubbable.) At some state universities, legislators and politically appointed regents try to resist the progressive takeover by establishing new institutes on campus. Faculty and administrators do everything in their power to isolate these initiatives, which have, indeed, proven incapable of altering the campus climate. The reason for the full-spectrum resistance is simple: The proponents of “making a better future” feel themselves duty-bound to cancel, subvert, and destroy anything that might impede its arrival.

We should not underestimate the impulse to smash and annihilate. Three years after 9/11, I attended a lecture by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. He was deft enough to avoid outright endorsement of Osama bin Laden’s mission to destroy nearly three thousand lives. But his joy was evident. The empire had taken casualties, a good in itself. We must not deceive ourselves, Badiou insinuated in his recondite remarks to the audience. A great deal must be destroyed to make way for a better future. Today,

progressive college students are sharing bin Laden's 2002 manifesto condemning the United States and justifying the attack, commending it to others as the best way to understand why one must support Hamas and its nihilistic enterprise. "Settler colonialism" must be extirpated if we're to break through to a just and righteous condition.

In the United States, we are fortunate that the killing remains symbolic. Andrea Douglas and Jalane Schmidt organized Swords Into Plowshares for the purpose of melting the statue of Robert E. Lee that had been removed from its pedestal in Charlottesville. In October 2023, they achieved their goal. While witnessing Lee's face sliced by a blowtorch, Douglas said, "It feels like witnessing a public execution." Anthropologist Michael Taussig described the statue's destruction as a necessary ritual of desecration. Whether it was "necessary" is something I doubt. But he's right about desecration. Melting Lee amounted to a ritual assault on the world over which his figure presided, from the erection of the statue in 1924 to the present. Our idealism demands this assault. Just as English departments executed the "dead white males" a generation ago, we must kill the "old gods" to make way for a new spirit, one that will usher in a truly inclusive society, or so we are told.

As Rorty promised, metaphysical nihilism has stimulated a utopian idealism. It takes many forms. He preferred American liberalism; others adopt Marxist and post-Marxist programs. But these visions of reform and revolution are united in their refusal to allow reality (which nihilism denies has essential characteristics, characterizing its apparent substance as a linguistic convention, social construction, and projection of power) to constrain our dreams. This refusal of limits incubates extreme demands for freedom, equality, justice, and many other urgent though formless notions. (Without some account of human nature, one cannot articulate stable notions of freedom, equality, justice, or anything else pertaining to human flourishing.) However vague in actuality, these aspirations are expressed in the noblest terms our tradition possesses, and those employing them claim the moral high ground.

But the idealistic nihilists are wrong about reality. It *does* impose limits, not out of malign intent or in order to claim "privilege," but simply because we are creatures in a world not of our own making. This deep truth angers progressives. Reality has no essential form or structure, nihilism teaches; therefore, all limits are unjustly imposed by bad actors and wicked cultural systems: racists and patriarchy, fascists and white privilege, and on and on. These latter-day principalities and powers must be deposed, deconstructed, and smashed. In this rage against limitations, the utopian projects become nihilistic, not in the metaphysical sense of denying transcendence, but in the moral sense of embracing destruction as a sacred act of cleansing that will midwife a new creation.

Andrea Douglas and Jalane Schmidt seem to imagine that destroying the Lee monument will enable the arrival of a harmonious, equitable, and inclusive society. This is naive. One cannot desecrate the image of a man venerated by millions without stoking enmity. At times, the victory dances and fist pumps in celebrations of toppled statues suggest that today's protagonists relish the dream of trampling, subjugating, and defeating adversaries. By and large, however, idealistic nihilism refuses to acknowledge its aggression. It responds to backlash by denouncing it as racist or some other pathology that must be extirpated. Our universities have already written the script. Efforts will be redoubled. More will be destroyed.

A few weeks after October 7, as donors revolted against the shocking pusillanimity of university leaders in the face of student and faculty support for Hamas's atrocities, Harvard's president sought to change the subject. "Antisemitism has a very long and shameful history at Harvard," Gay intoned. "For years, this University has done too little to confront its continuing presence. No longer." The problem was not student activists and faculty who embrace a virulent anti-Western ideology. Rather, it was the WASP grandees, long dead, who besmirched Harvard with their sins. Committees must be formed to determine how to counter this legacy! Isn't it past time to expunge the name of A. Lawrence Lowell from Harvard's campus?

"From the river to the sea": Students do not chant this refrain in the hopes of establishing an Islamic regime. They are taking up the call of nihilistic idealism. In order to make way for the glorious future, we must destroy that which is established, extirpate those who are recalcitrant, and wipe clean the slate of history.

Against those who question God's wisdom and benevolence, Alexander Pope famously declaimed in his *Essay on Man*: "Whatever is, is right." Samuel Johnson found the assertion too sweeping. Something of what *is* arises out of our wicked choices, and whatever obtains as a result is not right. That said, Pope's sentiment is generally correct. Our disposition toward reality should be one of gratitude, not anger and hostility. In good times and in bad, we are blessed by reality's luminous power of existence. Today's utopian moralists are inclined toward the opposite, a spiritual nihilism: Whatever is, is wrong.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ A favorite collect (liturgical prayer) from my Anglican days is said on the Second Sunday of Advent:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and

inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I heard that prayer as a child. The liturgical experts of that time were convinced that “hast” and “thy” made such a prayer remote and inaccessible. Entirely untrue. At age ten, if not before, I knew the plain meaning: I should read the Holy Scriptures and cleave to their message of salvation. That as an adolescent I did not read, mark, and inwardly digest reflected my own falling away from the faith, not the “remoteness” of older forms of the English language.

◆ “Adolescents with very conservative parents are 16 to 17 percentage points more likely to be in good or excellent mental health compared to their peers with very liberal parents.” So concludes Jonathan Rothwell in a new study, “Parenting is the Key to Adolescent Mental Health,” sponsored by the Institute for Family Studies and Gallup. The crucial factor contributing to good mental health is clear discipline combined with parental love. Children need a warm authoritarian family culture. The problem among progressive parents is not affection. Liberal parents manifest parental love at only slightly lower levels than conservative parents. (The survey asked for responses, among other things, to the statement, “I hug or kiss my child every day.”) But liberals are significantly less likely to impose discipline than are parents who identify as conservative. (This assessment is based on responses to statements such as “I find it difficult to discipline my child” and “My child often gets their [sic] way when we have a conflict.”) Put simply, the liberal ideal of an affectionate permissive family culture is bad for children, whereas the old-fashioned view of authority is good.

And not just for children. In the twentieth century, the rise of the permissive family culture correlated with anxieties about “adolescent rebellion,” the purported cause of troubled relations between parents and teenage kids. Rothwell notes that survey data show that conservative parents enjoy the strongest relations with their adolescent children, while liberals suffer the worst. It’s interesting to note that parents who are “very liberal” as opposed to “liberal” have nearly as good relations with their adolescent children as do conservatives. In my estimation, this positive outcome stems from the fact that “very liberal” means adherence to doctrinaire progressivism, which has its own authoritarian character, as we see at universities. Ironically, the key to successful parenting by the “very liberal” is the progressive taboo: authority.

◆ Anthony Lusvardi, S.J., teaches sacramental theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. In “Confessing Other People’s Sins” (*The Lamp*, Issue 19), he takes

issue with the practice of apologizing for historic wrongs. In his experience, there's a certain type who enters the confessional only to launch into complaints about other people's misdeeds, which amounts to a spiritual evasion of his own sins. Is something like that happening when a city council or college president issues statements that repent of past harms? "The problem with historical apologies is that they never involve taking responsibility for one's own actions but necessarily mean confessing sins committed by others." And it is in the faux penitents' interest to exaggerate those sins. "The more heinous the crimes of others, the more venial our own offenses seem. We can get off the hook for our smaller sins by spotlighting the graver sins of others."

◆ At Vatican II, the Church repudiated the view that Jews inherit the guilt of crucifying Christ. Yet, Lusvardi continues, "if we apologize for crimes committed a century ago, we seem tacitly to have accepted at least some notion of collective guilt—our own." Those who issue apologies for past misdeeds imagine that they are engaging in a helpful therapeutic exercise, diffusing present-day grudges and blunting animosities. Lusvardi is not so sure: "Collective guilt opens the door to collective punishment." Such apologies invite endless relitigation of past grievances, which practitioners of identity politics exploit. There is no resolution or forgiveness: "Our contemporary rites of public apology are ineffective, ultimately counterproductive—like adding new stories to the Tower of Babel—because they pretend to a justice that only God can give."

◆ Sebastian Milbank offers a sober assessment of the university rot exposed by tenured professors' grotesque cheerleading for Hamas's atrocities:

Even as real academic freedom is crushed to nothing by the neoliberal transformation of universities into giant quangocracies, a group of resentful, self-indulgent bourgeois radicals are quite happy to take on academic sinecures. In a sense, both groups authorise the other. For the radicals, their extremism gets a steady stream of subsidy, and hides behind the veil of respectability that is a major university. For the administration, they gain a halo of radicalism, even as they grind down academic freedom, prestige and scholarly independence in service of an ever more marketised and routinised higher education system.

◆ Bret Stephens on the double standards at elite universities:

At Yale, the law professor Amy Chua was relieved of some teaching duties and ostracized by students and the administration on blatantly pretextual grounds while her original sin, as the Times reported in 2021, was her praise for Brett

Kavanaugh. Yet when Zareena Grewal, an associate professor of American studies at Yale, posted on X on Oct. 7 that Israel “is a murderous, genocidal settler state and Palestinians have every right to resist through armed struggle,” Yale defended her by saying Grewal’s comments “represent her own views.”

The University of Pennsylvania manifests the same pattern. Conservative law professor Amy Wax was waterboarded with investigations and hearings. Meanwhile, administrators fall over themselves to protect the free speech of the most rebarbative defenders of Hamas.

◆ Corruption of a different sort: The *Yale Daily News* reports that 78.9 percent of grades given to students in 2022 were A or A-. The A grade was given to 58 percent of students. There are variations among disciplines. In Engineering & Applied Science, 57 percent received A or A-, while in Women’s Gender & Sexuality Studies, 92 percent got the top grades.

◆ Ron E. Hassner, a Cal Berkeley professor of political science, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*:

When college students who sympathize with Palestinians chant “From the river to the sea,” do they know what they’re talking about? I hired a survey firm to poll 250 students from a variety of backgrounds across the U.S. Most said they supported the chant, some enthusiastically so (32.8%) and others to a lesser extent (53.2%).

But only 47% of the students who embrace the slogan were able to name the river and the sea. Some of the alternative answers were the Nile and the Euphrates, the Caribbean, the Dead Sea (which is a lake). Less than a quarter of these students knew who Yasser Arafat was (12 of them, or more than 10%, thought he was the first prime minister of Israel). Asked in what decade Israelis and Palestinians had signed the Oslo Accords, more than a quarter of the chant’s supporters claimed that no such peace agreements had ever been signed.

Dr. Johnson’s words come to mind: “Ignorance, when it is voluntary, is criminal; and he may be properly charged with evil who refused to learn how he might prevent it.” All the more so when the ignorant take up chants that call for the annihilation of a nation.

◆ There are many reasons to be unhappy with the academic establishment. One friend took action. She had made a generous donation twenty years ago to our alma mater, Haverford College. In response to this year's fundraising campaign, she wrote to the development office that, far from making another contribution, she wanted her money back. As I write, she reports that no response has been forthcoming.

◆ Another course of action: Found alternative institutions. That's what Jewish leaders have done in Manhattan. In fall 2024, Emet Classical Academy, a Jewish preparatory school for grades 6 through 12 on New York's Upper East Side, will enroll its inaugural class of sixth graders. The school's mission offers mastery of classical languages, understanding of the great books and figures of the Western tradition, preparation for American leadership, and a commitment to Jewish identity and modern Israel.

◆ Psalm 45:3-4:

Strap your sword upon your thigh, O mighty warrior,

in your pride and our majesty.

Ride out and conquer in the cause of truth

and for the sake of justice.

In the face of today's challenges, we need the élan of the Church Militant. Recall Matthew 10:34: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword."

◆ During the week before Christmas, Rome issued *Fiducia Supplicans*, a woolly-headed document about blessing same-sex couples. Anything remotely resembling a marriage blessing is *streng verboten*. But it's OK to use exquisitely refined pastoral judgment sometimes, in some circumstances, to bless same-sex couples. The document strikes a clear note: Nothing can be blessed that is counter to God's will. But one wonders: couples? We're not talking about tennis partners. Confusion mounts. Two homosexuals united in a relationship can be blessed *ascouples*, but not as sexual partners? One predicts that Fr. James Martin, Catholicism's leading Rainbow collaborationist, will jump into the confusion to provide clarification. Indeed, within hours of the release of the document, he offered a blessing to a same-sex couple, helpfully (for his purposes)

photographed by the *New York Times*. They are holding hands, heads bowed, as Fr. Martin makes the sign of the cross. No, no, he was not blessing their sexual relationship! That can't be done, the Vatican assures us. Except, of course, when it is done, which seems to be the obvious consequence of the document, and possibly its intent.

◆ During the long year of 2020, I marveled at Anthony Fauci's ability to combine winsome cheerfulness with off-putting arrogance and moral self-satisfaction. Both were very much in evidence in a recent BBC interview of Fauci conducted by Katty Kay. As they strolled past Dahlgren Chapel on the Georgetown campus, where Fauci and his wife Christine Grady were married decades ago, Kay asked him why he no longer goes to church. In his charming way, Fauci replied that he regards his "personal ethics on life" to be strong enough to keep him "on the right path." He adverted to unspecified "negative aspects" of the institutional church and dismissed churchgoing as "a pro forma thing that I don't really need to do."

March 2024

ROME'S CONCORDAT

A few months ago, I predicted that the Francis pontificate would seek to establish cordial relations with the Rainbow Reich. (See “While We’re At It,” January 2024, composed late November 2023.) In mid-December the Vatican issued the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, vindicating my assessment of the present regime in Rome. The document provides urgent restatements of Catholic teaching on marriage and sexual morality, which of course proscribe gay unions and gay sex. But *Fiducia Supplicans* advertises itself as a “specific and innovative contribution to the pastoral meaning of blessings.” Its purportedly groundbreaking insights allow the “non-ritualized” blessing of couples in “irregular situations,” a category that includes gay couples. In intent and effect, the new teaching offers a fig leaf to the sexual revolution.

Viewed in terms of the history of moral theology, the teachings of *Fiducia Supplicans* on priestly blessings recapitulate the perennial debate between rigorism and probabilism, although in a muddy, pastoral way. Under this framework, the document admits of a narrow reading that minimizes (or even eliminates) any suggestion of changes in the Church’s perennial teaching on marriage and sexual morality. Cardinal Müller makes a good case that, even read charitably, *Fiducia Supplicans* goes beyond probabilism into error. I agree, but my point is different. Whatever one’s assessment of the finer points of moral theology, the notion that nothing important is changed by *Fiducia Supplicans* ignores ecclesial and social realities.

You don’t need to be a weatherman to know which way the winds are blowing in this pontificate. During his reign, Pope Benedict XVI established a presumptive permission to celebrate the Extraordinary Form of the Mass (the traditional Latin Mass). Pope Francis reversed this ruling in *Traditionis Custodes*. Aside from narrowly circumscribed situations, priests are now prohibited from celebrating the traditional Latin Mass. Rome can grant special permission, but I’m told the requests are routinely denied.

The reverse has now happened when it comes to the Church’s relation to the sexual revolution. Neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI made concessions to the LGBTQ juggernaut that has brought gay “marriage” to the West. John Paul II underscored the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts. Pope Benedict urged greater scrutiny of seminarians to exclude those with a homosexual orientation. The broad prohibition against any appearance of accommodation to the Rainbow Reich was plain to even the casual observer. The details of moral theology as they apply to *Fiducia Supplicans* admit of a range of interpretations, as I note above. But the general implications are obvious. A clarifying document was issued in early January by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the

Faith, which had issued *Fiducia Supplicans*. It allows that a bishop may use his judgment concerning local conditions and impose strict criteria for blessings of same-sex couples. But the clarification insists that bishops cannot enact a “total or definitive denial of this path [of blessing same-sex couples] that is proposed to priests.”

Note well: Under Pope Francis, bishops are expressly denied the authority to prevent their priests from offering blessings to same-sex couples, even as they are denied the authority to permit their priests to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass. Ordinary Catholics, progressive, conservative, and in between, are not stupid. They can see what is being indulged, encouraged, and rewarded—and what is being discouraged, chastised, and punished. The pattern is clear. Team Francis bends over backward to accommodate “new realities,” while never tiring of wielding rhetorical truncheons against the “rigid” and “backward-looking” folks who are not keen to sell the apostolic inheritance for the pottage of relevance. Bishops and priests are all the more attentive to these signs of papal intention, for they must live out their vocations under strictures laid out by Rome.

So *Fiducia Supplicans* did not surprise me in the least. Nor did it surprise any but the most naive bishops and priests. Nevertheless, it has sparked remarkable dissent, perhaps because it makes explicit an unhappy reality: a long-established, well recognized pattern of cultural accommodation. From the Archbishop of Montevideo, Uruguay to the Archbishop of Nairobi, Kenya, statements have been issued that, in one way or another, amount to a rejection of the substance and implications of the latest teaching of Pope Francis. *Fiducia Supplicans* brings into the open a general trend of this pontificate. Rome wants to negotiate a concordat with the sexual revolution. Many Catholics are resisting, and I expect the backlash to grow. The Dutch episcopacy, which a generation ago was at the forefront of theological liberalization, has quietly cold-shouldered *Fiducia Supplicans*; some French bishops have instructed priests that they may bless homosexual individuals (as was already the case), but not homosexual couples.

Another sign of the true import of *Fiducia Supplicans* is the fact that progressive Catholics likewise sense that the document opens the way for accommodation with the sexual mores of the West. Church authorities in Germany, Austria, Belgium, and elsewhere in Western Europe are eager to make ever greater concessions to the sexual revolution. They toss aside the caution expressed in the magisterial document, which emphasizes discernment of particular situations and circumstances. A recent statement by a group of European bishops says that priests *must* bless same-sex couples when asked. In these circles, the Church is positively required to use its sacred authority to buttress the Rainbow Reich.

I doubt Pope Francis was happy when he learned that Fr. James Martin had used *Fiducia Supplicans* as warrant to invite a reporter and photographer to cover his blessing of two men holding hands. But the Argentine pope should not have been surprised. The document he endorsed puts an exclamation point on a wide array of statements, gestures, and actions that encourage the Church to pivot to a friendly stance toward the sexual revolution, one willing to probe from points of comity and cooperation—the basis for a concordat.

Many ironies surround *Fiducia Supplicans*. Francis portrays himself as the pope of the peripheries. Yet the gay agenda epitomizes the preoccupations of the rich West. The farther one goes from Washington and Brussels, the more intense the opposition to the spirit and letter of this purported “development.”

Another irony: The Francis pontificate has expended a great deal of rhetorical energy playing up “synodality.” Church resources have been devoted to a process that claims to “hear all voices” and discern new and more consultative ways of conducting church affairs. Yet *Fiducia Supplicans* was drafted without input from other dicasteries, to say nothing of the College of Cardinals and other leaders of the far-flung Catholic Church. Furthermore, even a casual appraisal of the argument for this new “development” of the pastoral theology of blessing reveals a strange, indeed bizarre self-referentiality. *Fiducia Supplicans* draws primarily on previous statements by Pope Francis. The document relies on a sui generis appeal to papal authority that would make Pius IX blush: The development of pastoral theology by Pope Francis is authoritative because of the authoritative statements of Pope Francis.

Yet another irony: Those who claim that Pope Francis advances a countercultural view of the environment, migration, and the “marginalized” are either deluded or mendacious, since what he says about these issues largely corresponds with what one hears in the halls of Harvard, Google’s boardroom, and other bastions of elite progressivism. The current regime in Rome cheered Covid lockdowns, promotes climate activism, rejects measures to prevent mass migration, uses therapeutic language, and echoes DEI nostrums in official documents. Now, with the promulgation of *Fiducia Supplicans*, Pope Francis has steered the Church toward a concordat with the Rainbow Reich. In almost every respect, Francis oversees a Curia that is in sync with the richest and most powerful people in the West on many issues—and when not in sync, is careful not to contradict elite dogmas. (To do so would make one “rigid” and “backward-looking.”) It’s plain that Francis has erected a Davos pontificate, as thoroughly captured by secular interests as were the Renaissance popes.

Sow the wind; reap the whirlwind. Major sectors of the Catholic Church in Belgium, Germany, and other rich-world nations have already embraced the Rainbow Reich, in deed if not always in word. Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg intones

platitudes about our purported new understandings of homosexuality. Lay leaders of the German Synodal Way sound like women's studies professors at Tufts. In my estimation, it is as close to certain as any prediction of the future that these jurisdictions will find ways to affirm and bless the sexual revolution tout court—not just homosexuality, but abortion and artificial means of reproduction, too, as well as the closely related practice of doctor-assisted suicide. Two hundred years ago, these churches were chaplaincies to a counterrevolutionary elite. In the twenty-first century, they are reverting to type, only this time elites are secular proponents of a world remade by the sexual revolution and its promise to free us from our bodies.

Catholicism has changed since the Congress of Vienna. It is now a global Church, not a European one. I will venture another prediction. The erratic, anti-traditional, and authoritarian Francis pontificate will destroy the modern imperial papacy and usher in a less centralized, more federalized church. When Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, he was trying to use papal authority to shore up traditional teaching. He failed, and in failing, he created conditions for the craziness of the 1970s. Progressives of all sorts—theological, moral, and liturgical—saw that, though they were de jure limited, they were de facto free to do as they pleased.

With *Fiducia Supplicans*, Pope Francis imposes novelty by papal fiat. Past behavior suggests that he will respond to resistance with naked exercises of papal power. The effect will be to discredit the concentration of power in Rome, epitomized by Vatican I's declaration of papal infallibility and realized in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which incorporated the Church's life into a single legal system subject to papal oversight and discretion. The federalization is already happening. Pope Francis made an exception for China, forsaking the right to appoint bishops there. He'll likely do the same for Germany. In the United States, his effort to limit and eventually eliminate the traditional Latin Mass is being met with quiet noncompliance. Now, African bishops and many others are rejecting *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Thus a final irony: Pope Francis is creating a synodal church of sorts, not by means of round tables and "sharing," but through imperious methods that arouse dissent. He is battering the church into more autonomous fragments. This new form of church (not entirely remote from what was envisioned by some at Vatican II) may be less coordinated, less coherent. But it will be more attentive to local realities—and thus less easily captured by the Davos elite, a very positive outcome. God writes straight with crooked lines. Historians may look back on the strange career of Jorge Bergoglio, one marked by a genius for institutional turmoil and destruction, and discern the wry smile of God's providence.

Queering Foreign Policy

As I note above, the Rainbow Reich enjoys the loyalty of elites across the West. But it is first and foremost America's project. So argues Helen Andrews in a survey of the central role of gay rights in American foreign policy ("Our LGBT Empire: Why is it America's business to queer the Donbass?," *The American Conservative*). In a 2011 speech, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton intoned, "Gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights," and she promised to "use all the tools of American diplomacy, including the potent enticement of foreign aid, to promote gay rights around the world." Her promise has been fulfilled. The U.S. unstintingly promotes the LGBTQ agenda.

These efforts have met with resistance. Outside of North America, Western Europe, Australia, and Latin America, the LGBTQ agenda is not popular. Asian countries are not keen to adopt the Rainbow flag. The Chinese government often cracks down on gay activists, deeming their aspirations contrary to China's family values. Only Taiwan has legalized gay marriage, in the face of popular opposition, as dictated by its Constitutional Court. (In a 2018 referendum, 72 percent voted to restore the understanding of marriage as between one man and one woman.) With the exception of South Africa, African and Islamic countries are actively hostile to the Rainbow Reich. Last October, the Supreme Court of India refused to impose gay marriage on the nation, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has inveighed against the "urban, elitist views" behind the push for LGBTQ rights.

America's crusade to expand the Rainbow Reich has had geopolitical consequences. Nearly ten years ago, I reflected on the ways in which Vladimir Putin was positioning himself as the moral leader of an anti-Western coalition ("Global Culture Wars," April 2014). Early in the 2010s, Russia passed a law restricting "propaganda promoting non-traditional sexual relations." In subsequent years, Putin often presented himself as a defender of traditional values. He continues to do so.

Putin is a clever operator. He can see that a great deal of the world resents America's cultural imperialism, which is evident wherever the Rainbow flag is waved. In 2014, when Russia was hosting the Winter Olympics, the Human Rights Campaign gave \$100,000 to the LGBTQ movement in that country. In recent years, American money flowed into Chinese gay advocacy groups until they were shut down by the Chinese government. Under the Biden administration, the U.S. government allocates more than \$2 billion annually to promote "gender equity and equality" worldwide, a rubric that includes LGBTQ rights. It's not an exaggeration to say that nearly the entire gay rights movement in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Islamic world is astroturfed by American money, whether it comes from U.S. government grants or straight from the pockets of wealthy donors, whose efforts are subsidized by our tax code, with its scheme of deductions for charitable donations.

Putin's decision to position himself as the leader of a global moral majority has paid off. The Human Rights Campaign's website features a map of the globe. The countries that allow gay marriage are highlighted in red. Outside of Latin America, they are largely the same countries that have joined the American-led sanctions regime established to counter Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Those countries not allowing gay marriage have largely refused to participate in the sanctions regime. India has many reasons to maintain commercial ties with Russia, not the least of which are its energy needs. But the prospect of being lectured to by American diplomats and watching the money flow to gay activists undoubtedly plays a role as well.

And then there are the facts on the ground, which don't dispose world leaders to join the Rainbow Reich. As Andrews observes:

Even many places that are inclined to be chill about private acts between adults balk at how far America is taking things. In America, tens of thousands of people cut off their breasts or genitals every year trying to change their sex. Judges tell parents they will lose custody if they don't let their children be castrated. Rising STD rates among gay men have led the CDC to approve the continuous use of antibiotics as a prophylactic (DoxylPEP), even though this will surely result in antibiotic-resistant superbugs. Our birthrates are collapsing, and almost half of the children we do have are out of wedlock. There are lots of reasons other countries might look at us and think maybe we don't have our sexual norms exactly right.

It's never pleasant to be pushed around by a superpower. It's more galling to be cattle-prodded toward the Rainbow Reich's evident dysfunctions.

Donald Trump, Again

The Biden strategy is succeeding. Democratic operatives, local prosecutors, lawfare activists, and the Biden White House have colluded to promote Donald Trump's candidacy. A number of legal cases against Trump are under way. Liberal media support these prosecutions as honorable applications of the rule of law, necessary to save "our democracy." The upshot: Trump's support among Republican voters has increased. Results from Iowa and New Hampshire indicate that he will be the Republican nominee. Many political savants believe this outcome favors Democrats: The Orange Man's capacity to turn off voters will pave the way for a Biden victory in November.

Wall Street Journal columnist Holman Jenkins has warned that cynical Democratic Party leaders and their media enablers have miscalculated. Their machinations have kept Trump in the public eye. More importantly, the orchestrated prosecutions have burnished his image as an outsider. And because we are living in a time when the

American public is angry, alienated, restless, and eager to punish establishment leaders, Trump's put-upon-outsider image turns out to be a valuable asset.

America's liberal elites (and their Never-Trump allies on the right) are playing a dangerous game. Having learned nothing from 2016, our establishment is framing the upcoming election as a referendum on its own leadership. As 2024 began, *The Atlantic* ran a special issue warning that a Trump victory would usher in an authoritarian regime; the *New Yorker* evoked the fascist threat with a cover cartoon of Trump goose-stepping in a military uniform. The message is clear. It's either the good people, the smart people, the people who bought into being today's wonderful, inclusive, innovative, prosperous world (Diversity is our strength!)—or the disastrous ascendancy of the bad people, the insurrectionists, the authoritarians, the fascists, the racists (Jim Crow 2.0!).

Atlantic editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg insists (again and again) that Trump is a clear and present threat to all that is good and decent. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* run article after article warning that Trump will undermine the "rules-based international order" and prevent the free movement of labor, goods, and capital. (The *Wall Street Journal* often echoes this charge.) Trump will encourage racists and xenophobes. He will derail the great project of constructing, for the first time in human history, a genuinely "open" society, one that strives toward ever greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. No human being is illegal!

By framing Trump's campaign in this way, the most powerful people in America are taking a grave risk. Our elite are ensuring that voters will go to the polls knowing that a vote for Trump is a vote against their leadership, against *them*. What are they thinking? Have they forgotten the endless wars, the uncontrolled border, the deindustrialized heartland, the epidemic of overdose deaths, drag queen story hours, concerned parents deemed domestic terrorists, and homeless encampments? Harvard, the cynosure of elite pride and aspiration, made a plagiarizing social-justice hack its president. Do the high-minded folks currently cheering Trump's indictments not realize that John Q. Public recognizes that there are rules for ordinary people and rules for elites and their favored clients? (Two lawyers who tossed a Molotov cocktail into a police car during BLM unrest in New York received sympathetic coverage in the *New York Times* and fifteen- and twelve-month sentences. Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes got eighteen years for his involvement in the Capitol riot.) It's hard to know which is more damning in the framing (yet again!) of the upcoming election as a choice between the Responsible and the Deplorable: the arrogance or the stupidity.

Voters have many hopes and fears. It had been my wish that Ron DeSantis would lead a new generation into power on the right. But very nearly everyone agrees on the role that

Donald Trump plays in our increasingly decadent political culture. He is Shiva, the destroyer of worlds. His election—a second time—against every effort of elite-generated propaganda, massive campaign expenditure, manipulation of mail-in voting, and relentless legal warfare would undermine our already unpopular and wobbling system of power and privilege. Goldberg and his friends view this destabilizing role, so central to Trump’s appeal, as *prima facie* disqualifying. Their governance is good and benevolent. They rely on knowledge and expertise. They follow the science! Any deviation from or opposition to their ascendancy must be evil and wicked. We can’t have ignorant people, unqualified people, running our country.

In my estimation, a Trump victory in November is likely. It is true that outside his circle of devoted followers he is not a beloved candidate. But a majority of Americans are bitter about the current state of our country. Goldberg and his allies, both Democrat and Republican, repeatedly insist that it’s either them or Trump. Given this choice, a surprising number of voters will opt for Trump. His margin of victory will increase in proportion to how many times Joe Biden conjures the ghost of Bull Connor and *Washington Post* columnists evoke Hitler. Holman Jenkins is right: Our hapless establishment, which has made a mess of so many things over the last thirty years, will ensure the election of Donald Trump.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ The German government has formulated a National Security Strategy. Its Asian dimension will “prioritise gender-transformative projects,” along with green energy development. The idea seems to be that windmills festooned with rainbow streamers will provide collective defense.

◆ The *New York Times* recently ran a long piece by Nicholas Confessore. “America Is Under Attack’: Inside the Anti-D.E.I. Crusade” informs readers that—gasp!—some people seek to break the grip of DEI ideology on our institutions. (FIRST THINGS is mentioned as part of the “crusade.”) Lefty socialist Freddie deBoer was unimpressed:

Confessore treats all of the described efforts as straightforwardly malign without bothering to really make the case for why. The piece does not really bother advocating for DEI, makes a remarkably limp attempt at defining what conservatives (and others) are mad about, and clearly proceeds from the assumption that the majority of its readers will recognize everything that’s being described as wicked without argument.

Sadly, Confessore is right about *New York Times* readers. DeBoer: “The problem with the New York Times [sic] in 2024 is that their business model entails selling affluent urban liberals their own assumptions about the world back to them.”

◆ After the release of *Fiducia Supplicans* last December, Anglican theologian (and FIRST THINGS regular) Hans Boersma penned an editorial in *Touchstone* magazine. He pulled no punches:

December 18, 2023, will go down in history as the date on which the die was cast: the date on which the church renounced the gospel’s right to call us to repentance; the date that, more than any other, signals the church’s implosion in the West.

He goes on to write, “When the church refuses to teach the truth, when she fails to call sinners to repentance, and when she blesses homosexual unions, it is the prince of darkness she follows, not the God of the Scriptures.” That’s not Protestant gloating. “The moral collapse of Catholic sexual ethics concerns every one of our ecclesial communities, for the entire Christian world has for many years been inspired by the moral teaching of the Catholic Church.” Everyone, not just Catholics, suffers from “the loss of the Catholic Church as a moral compass for Western Civilization.” As I note above, however, “implosion” oversells papal authority. The Catholic Church is gathering herself to recover her voice as steward of the apostolic inheritance.

◆ A woman is sitting at her husband’s wake. A man leans over and asks, “Do you mind if I say a word?” “No, go right ahead,” she replies. He stands, clears his throat, and pronounces, “Plethora.” The gathered friends are baffled. He sits down and the woman says to him quietly, “Thanks, that means a lot.”

◆ Writing on X, a priest reports: “A bit of good news . . . I’ve had more confessions of the ‘Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it’s been 20, 25, 30, 40, 50 years since my last confession . . .’ sort this year than I ever remember. I’m seeing more people at Mass than I ever remember.”

◆ Bowling Green State University associate professor of philosophy Kevin Vallier has recently published *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to*

Liberalism, a book defending liberalism against its religious critics. A précis of his brief against Catholic integralism (“The integralist crusade”) appeared as the 11 January 2024 feature of *The Tablet*. I was struck by the closing exhortation: “Liberals should ensure that the state strives to remain neutral between belief systems and moral doctrines, and allow social and political space for communities who do not share their values to experiment with their own forms of life.” It’s hard to know where to begin. The liberal state as neutral? Isn’t the liberal state’s vaunted neutrality based on liberal “belief systems and moral doctrines,” in particular the belief system wherein the individual choice of values is the supreme value? And the moral doctrine that any and all obligatory moral doctrines are violations of the highest good, which is personal autonomy? Vallier would be less self-deceived if he had written the following: “Liberals should ensure that the state strive to remain liberal,” which is to say under the dominion of liberals—or, put differently, integrally liberal.

◆ Another sentence in Vallier’s article struck me: “In the US, Catholics have enormous intellectual influence among right-wing elites: if integralists can convert them, they can rule.” *Enormous* influence? That’s likely news to the leadership team at the Club for Growth, the Bush family political mafia, and the Trump campaign. But there’s something to Vallier’s observation, hyperbole aside. Among young conservatives engaged in politics, Catholicism has cachet, and this in spite of the hostility of Pope Francis toward anything related to American conservatism. To some degree, the rich tradition of Catholic social doctrine explains the appeal, as it allows Christian wisdom to inform political judgment in nuanced ways. But I would not discount the image (and reality) of Catholicism as the most imposing anti-modern institution in the West. Intransigent opposition to abortion, a celibate clergy, governance without obeisance to the democratic ethos, unrepentant ritualism—the Catholic Church limns a world antithetical to that imaged by progressivism and Whiggery.

◆ And then there’s Catholicism’s clarity about the priority of prayer and contemplation over politics and action (an emphasis by no means unique to Catholicism). Hans Urs von Balthasar, writing in *Love Alone Is Credible*: “Whoever does not come to know the face of God in contemplation will not recognize it in action, even when it reveals itself to him in the face of the oppressed and humiliated.”

◆ Whenever I book a plane ticket, I’m reminded that, beginning on May 7, 2025, I will be required to present a REAL-ID compliant license—that is, a technically advanced form of identification that is more secure. Meanwhile, TSA has implemented a policy of

allowing illegal immigrants to pass through airport security checkpoints without identification. Xenophobia would dictate a lax law for citizens and a severe law for foreigners. What do you call the reverse? Roger Scruton proposed *oikophobia*: fear of home, or self-contempt.

◆ In January, the European Parliament voted to make hate speech a “cross-border” crime, as are terrorism, arms trafficking, and money laundering. This measure allows Brussels to define what counts as hate speech and to stipulate minimum penalties. The main target is social media, the content of which the European establishment would like to control after the fashion of the American regime. Jacob Siegel’s 2023 essay in *Tabletmagazine*, “A Guide to Understanding the Hoax of the Century,” remains the definitive account of our domestic censorship regime.

◆ Covid lockdowns, the Russian collusion hoax, the Great Reset, anti-Trump hysteria, the green transition, uncontrolled migration—a number of my friends look at these and discern an elite conspiracy to override popular sentiment and suppress dissent. What else could explain that dark turn of events in recent years? I counsel them against false optimism: “No, no, it’s much worse than a conspiracy; it’s a consensus.”

◆ Pascal on the danger of satiation: “It is not good to be too free / It is not good to have all one needs.”

◆ Elite media are finally waking up to the fact that “evangelical” supporters of Trump are often EINOs, Evangelicals in Name Only. A January 8, 2024 *New York Times* article (“Trump Is Connecting With a Different Type of Evangelical Voter”) acknowledges that polling shows that Trump’s deepest support comes from self-identified evangelicals who don’t go to church. A 2021 Pew report indicates that Trump’s political popularity may have fueled an increase in self-identification as evangelical. A 2016 survey recorded that 25 percent of all white adults identified as born-again or evangelical Protestants. That cohort grew to 29 percent in 2020, even as church attendance declined. Takeaway: Religion in American public life is complicated, often paradoxical.

◆ In mid-January, I met a friend at the rock climbing gym. She's Chinese-American, born to parents who fled the Mao-led communists in the 1950s. I was taken aback to find that she had bitter words to say about the fact that New York City has housed and supported illegal immigrants, giving them hotel rooms, cell phones, and spending money. Even more striking: She reported that her boyfriend, a retired Wall Street guy, speculates that the Catholic Church is conspiring to bring in as many people as possible from Latin America. My policy is to avoid basing judgments about the public mood on anecdotes. But I'm also aware that it's wise to pay attention to what people say.

◆ Speaking of which: I often buy a cappuccino from a small proprietor down the street from my apartment. His parents fled Tibet with the Dalai Lama after the Chinese invaded in 1950. Born in southern India, he came to the United States as a teenager. He, too, was angered by the influx of migrants: "We're putting them in the Roosevelt Hotel while our own people are homeless and living on the street."

◆ "Our own people"—it warms my heart to hear a man whose English is accented speak so warmly of his fellow citizens.

◆ I've long thought that the mid-twentieth-century hostility to theological manuals was mistaken. As I was catching up on my reading, I was therefore pleased to read Brian Besong's 2015 essay in the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, "Reappraising the Manual Tradition." In the Catholic tradition, the term "manual" refers to instructional textbooks used in seminaries before Vatican II. Of their nature, these volumes have limitations. Primary sources offer a richer experience than a history textbook, and just so, reading St. Thomas's *Summa* enriches theological understanding more than a Thomistic manual, however well done. Yet as Besong notes, textbooks play an important role in any educational system. They provide an overview, a general orientation to the subject matter. Manuals in moral theology also give illustrations of moral principles as applied to particular cases. Taking students through these cases anchors their moral imaginations in the complex particularity of human life, an invaluable lesson not just for a priest in training, but for anyone who must exercise moral responsibility.

The theological manuals certainly have limitations. But Besong is right to defend their virtues. However limited and unimaginative these textbooks might be, they provide a foundation upon which talented and creative minds can build. Mid-century Catholic theological "giants" such as Yves Congar, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and

others derided “manualism.” They were blind to the fact that their own innovations and developments would be unintelligible to (and often misused by) those without solid training in the manual tradition. And, of course, most seminarians do not aim to become theological giants. They want to be good, well-formed priests. The demise of the manual tradition has deprived them of coherent, graspable, and reliable intellectual formation.

◆ Gustav Mahler: “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.”

◆ Seán Cardinal O’Malley spoke at the student-organized annual Cardinal O’Connor Conference on Life. “There’s no doubt,” O’Malley observed, “that the next major assaults in the next twenty-five years are going to come from those pushing physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia.” He pointed to present practices in Canada, where young people and the mentally ill are considered legitimate candidates for “assisted death.” He warned, “A society that allows parents to kill their children will eventually allow children to kill their parents.”

April 2024

EVERYDAY FREEDOM

Something is wrong. Throughout the West, people are angry, anxious, and discontented. Paradoxically, the ill temper arises amid wealth unimaginable to our recent ancestors. (But perhaps this is not a paradox after all. Recall 1 Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is the root of all evil.”) Shouldn’t we be at ease, sated or at least palliated by material and technical advances that have taken so much suffering out of life?

In *Everyday Freedom: Designing the Framework for a Flourishing Society*, Philip Howard ventures to diagnose the cause of the puzzling distempers of our time. Our malaise proceeds from the fact that the most advanced societies of the West have deprived human beings of agency. We live, often well, but we are not in charge of our circumstances. We can’t act in accord with our own judgments. Although we’re afforded many rights, we’re not permitted to roll up our sleeves and get things done.

A lawyer and noted advocate of regulatory and government reform, Howard has written extensively about the suffocating grip of rules, procedures, and “best practices.” His 2014 book, *The Rule of Nobody: Saving America from Dead Laws and Broken Government*, documents the evolution of today’s technocratic regime. Well-meaning people fight corruption, waste, and fraud. Good! The problem is this: To prevent bad things from happening, we’ve adopted elaborate systems to check abuses, and these systems, replete with detailed regulations and bureaucrats to enforce them, have the unintended effect of preventing good things from happening.

Howard is alive to the ways in which tort liability and regulatory restrictions pinion private initiative. Imagine that a hurricane topples trees and blocks roadways. Common sense urges local residents to fire up their chainsaws and clear the obstructions. But they hesitate. Someone down the street notes that a local ordinance requires permits for tree trimming. Another person reminds the gathered men that occupational safety regulations dictate the use of helmets. Are there enough safety vests to go around? A lawyer chimes in, warning that any mishap might trigger civil liability. Instead of getting on with what needs to be done, local residents look nervously out their windows, waiting for “the professionals” to come and do the job.

This scenario is repeated countless times, often in circumstances in which explicit regulations are not at issue. In my childhood, adults would not hesitate to chastise neighborhood children when they misbehaved. Now, few intervene. They worry that they’ll be shamed as “judgmental” or derided as busybodies. Our therapeutic culture has become all-powerful, turning “no” into a hurtful word. And if the children are black or

fall under another category protected in civil rights law, adults are doubly cautious, eager to avoid even the appearance of failing to respect diversity or violating the imperative of inclusion.

Taken individually, each rule, regulation, legal stricture, and cultural expectation is well intentioned. Construction helmets reduce head injuries. Legal liabilities encourage care and caution. It's a virtue to respect cultural differences. But Howard's argument is that, in aggregate, these constraints too often deter us from taking individual responsibility and getting on with what needs to be done. Inefficiencies pile up. A mess cleaned up spontaneously by confident citizens; a troublesome student dealt with according to the judgment of a seasoned school principal; infrastructure projects run by hurry-up bosses such as Robert Moses: These and other independent actions are replaced by clunky and often unresponsive procedures and bureaucracies.

As Bad as the inefficiencies are, the moral and cultural consequences are worse. Howard is right about human beings. We are spirited creatures. We take great satisfaction in solving problems and overcoming obstacles. People are proud of their ability to make a difference. When a group of strangers succeeds in freeing a car stuck in the snow, they high-five over their success. These moments, often trivial in the grand scheme of things, are deeply consequential for our sense of ourselves as purposeful agents capable of making a difference. This is what Howard means by "everyday freedom."

M

Matthew Crawford has plowed this furrow with great insight. He's alert to the imperium of experts that usurps individual judgment and initiative. In his account, "the scope for meaningful action by citizens has become so constricted that people don't enjoy real ownership of their world, whether on the level of individual agency or of collective sovereignty." His concerns echo those of Philip Howard. Crawford: "Initiative and discretion have been . . . crowded out by bureaucracy and expertise, wielded remotely."

A culture of safetyism can quickly shut down initiative. A generation ago, parents readily volunteered to chaperone middle-school kids on their field trips. Today, they are deterred by required training and protocols to prevent the possibility of sexual abuse. Again, the intention is good. But costs can outweigh benefits. A zero-tolerance mentality introduces friction into what were once organic, well-functioning moments of collective action by ordinary people.

Moreover, as Howard observes, the zeal to drive out every possibility of bad things happening nurtures a "culture of distrust." When we're fixated on what can go wrong, we begin to view our neighbors as potential sources of harm rather than partners in common projects. The same holds in the realm of civil rights and anti-discrimination.

These laws and expectations cast relationships between employers and employees, teachers and students, even neighbors and customers, as presumptively suspect. As a result, people tread carefully and minimize close interactions and cooperation with strangers, contact that can be difficult, awkward, and fraught, given our fallen state.

Howard urges us to turn away from rules and procedures. We need responsible people to occupy positions of authority, people we can trust to make good decisions, not always, but often enough to make the mistakes and misjudgments tolerable. Effecting this change will require more than a relaxation of legal regulations that over-police decisions, although that's certainly important. Howard urges that we need to pivot away from efforts to eliminate risk and toward a culture that tolerates imperfection. When we try to drive out the possibility of making mistakes or doing something wrong, we squelch freedom. We're human beings, not machines, which means that we're finite, imperfect, and prone to sin. A culture of freedom champions virtue and holds accountable those in positions of authority. But it's not utopian. Everyday freedom will never be perfect, and trying to make it so has brought us only mistrust, disquiet, and pessimism.

Nominalism

Is everything Ockham's fault? In the introduction to his postwar cri de cœur, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Richard Weaver seems to say as much. He traces today's nihilistic denial of universals back to William of Ockham, "who propounded the fateful doctrine of nominalism." But we need to be cautious in how we read Weaver. I don't think he intended to formulate a perverse negative Hegelianism, a view that treats history as the fateful outworking of bad philosophies. His brief sketch of the history of ideas at the outset of *Ideas Have Consequences* is meant to develop a concept for readers to use, rather than to provide a historical explanation. His claim, developed across the pages of the book, is that our present outlook, the "metaphysical dream" of our time, is functionally nominalist.

Crudely put, nominalism holds that universal truths do not exist. They are conventions—names we coin, mental constructs, as it were. Weaver is certainly correct about our dominant metaphysical dream. When someone speaks of the "social construction of reality," he is advancing a nominalist view. This way of talking is not restricted to the professoriate. Our society is functionally nominalist. Sure, some of us wince when people say that sex (a term that decades ago was replaced by "gender") is "socially constructed," and that therefore "men can give birth." But even those who object rarely have an articulate basis for dissent. That's because much of modern culture presumes the denial of universals. They are seen as dangerous threats to freedom and progress.

As I recently noted in these pages (“Idealistic Nihilism,” February 2024), Richard Rorty nicely illustrates the political reasons for today’s denial of universals. He claimed that old concepts such as essence, substance, and accident had been replaced by the modern scientific account that has no room for such notions. We may fix names such as “human being” to the ever-changing trajectory of DNA or speak of “natural right.” But these ascriptions are “nominal,” arbitrary conventions of language meant to pick out this or that moment in the continual flux of things. Rorty’s view does not teach that nothing exists. Rather, it holds that nothing is permanent; nothing anchors reality and provides constant, unchanging truths to which we must conform if we are to be wise and happy.

R

orty welcomed nihilism. (To my mind, this term is more apt than “nominalism,” which in Ockham’s formulation is most decidedly not nihilistic, since it was conceived to accentuate God’s omnipotence and sovereignty—for Ockham and his Franciscan followers, obviously something quite real.) Rorty celebrated the condition in which we are unburdened of truth, free to seek whatever future we want. Everything can be made and remade. Again, transgender ideology epitomizes this promise.

The gravamen of *Ideas Have Consequences* is that nihilism’s promise of empowerment is a false one. Yes, nihilism frees us from universal truths. But thus liberated, we are without resources either to think or to act with purpose and conviction. Freed from the obligation to act for the sake of truth, we have no resources by which to resist advertising, social pressure, ideology, and other homogenizing and dehumanizing forces of modernity. Put simply, without a metaphysical dream of universals, we are naked before the world. Thus unmanned, like nature herself in our technological mania for mastery, we are vulnerable to power’s designs; we become socially constructed. What are the countless embryos in storage at IVF clinics if not socially constructed, treated as mere things available for use by the powerful?

Weaver writes, “Man is constantly being assured today that he has more power than ever before in history, but his daily experience is one of powerlessness.” Substitute “freedom” for “power” and the insight becomes poignant. We live in a society that promises liberation yet delivers many iron cages of bondage. Philip Howard and Matthew Crawford limn a contemporary form of the bondage, our encasement in a legal and cultural regime that does not trust us to act wisely and responsibly. Let the experts decide!

Having graduated from college forty years ago, I can report that today’s students receive far more assurances than I did that they have freedom, more freedom than ever before in history. They are told that they are not to be bound by archaic notions such as patriotic duty, and certainly not by anything as untenable as divine commandments.

They're free to have sex with boys or girls, or perhaps both at the same time. They're free to choose their pronouns! These freedoms and others are not just offered. They are guaranteed, even to the point of punishment for those who create a "hostile environment" by dissenting.

Yet in 2024 these same young people are more anxious and constrained than were my classmates many decades ago. To a degree unimaginable to my younger self, those coming of age today are career-fixated, status-fixated, and appearance-fixated—all conditions of bondage to society's rules. And when not conformists in this respect, they are moral conformists, caught up in various moral panics, from "white privilege" to "climate catastrophe." When so many Ivy League undergraduates are on medication to address psychological disorders and distress, one can hardly speak of our time as one of great and expansive freedom.

Are Ockham and nominalism the root of all evil? I am hostile to the Lord of the Explanations, the one explanation to rule them all. Human freedom plays a role. We are not passive victims of bad ideas; by and large, we embrace and endorse them. I think Weaver would agree. As he observes throughout *Ideas*, a denial of universals reduces us to the unhappy condition of endless public contest for power. That denial does not liberate us. It enslaves us to the fickle flux of our desires. Weaver worried that this reduction to savagery and instinct foretold the end of Western civilization. He was right to worry.

War in Ukraine

C

Count me among those who harbor growing concerns about the ongoing war in Ukraine. Don't get me wrong. The Russian invasion clearly constitutes unjust aggression, and as an action of self-defense, Ukrainian resistance enjoys the greatest possible legitimacy. But a just cause does not exhaust the moral calculus of war. As I observed last year ("Peace in Ukraine," April 2023), political leaders must weigh the probability of success. It's wrong to throw men into the maw of battle when the odds are strongly against any kind of victory. Futile sacrifice may seem a heroic gesture, a way to win the honor of one's nation. But it is a mentality rejected by the Christian just war tradition.

A wiser and more knowledgeable friend recently drew my attention to the peace proposals put forward by Pope Benedict XV during World War I. His calls for peace in the war's first year were ignored. Those leading the entrenched armies were confident of decisive victory. In August 1917, after three years of slaughter in the trenches, the pontiff formulated a seven-point plan for peace. Vatican diplomats knew that French, German, and British leaders were interested in finding a way out of the man-killing stalemate on

the Western Front. Austro-Hungarian Emperor Karl endorsed the plan. German and British governments briefly entertained the possibility of a negotiated peace, but their generals argued against it. France and Italy rejected the peace plan out of hand. The war continued for another fifteen months.

There were many heroic deeds performed by brave men in the trenches of northern France. Some of the warring nations could make legitimate claims to be prosecuting the war for the sake of a just cause. Yet the historical consensus holds that the four million men who died on the Western Front did so to no good end. For four years, armies were locked in a war of attrition that neither side could win. Even after the Doughboys arrived and tipped the balance in 1918, the final territorial and political outcome was, if anything, worse than what would have obtained had the Great Powers adopted Pope Benedict's peace plan in 1917.

In the Great War's immediate aftermath, the peoples of Europe were not unaware of its moral reality. They were patriots, to be sure, but they sensed that millions had died for causes that could not be won. They suspected that their political leaders, captive to their own war-making propaganda, had not weighed the probability of success; they had not acted in a morally responsible fashion when the lives of fathers, sons, and brothers were at stake.

It was the awareness of pointless death on an unheard-of scale and suspicion of irresponsible leadership at the highest levels that led to the moral collapse of Europe. Had the Great Powers agreed to an armistice and peace process in 1915, as Pope Benedict urged, the Russian Revolution would not have occurred. Germany would not have been catapulted into the failed experiment in democracy that ended with Hitler's rise to power. Mussolini would not have emerged in Italy. French and British societies would not have suffered crises of legitimacy. Even in 1917 the possibility of salvaging the old order remained. But the dogs of war barked fiercely. Causes were deemed sacred, concessions traitorous. During the final months of 1918, as the Allies pressed for victory, casualties on both sides exceeded 1.4 million. Looking back on the futile carnage of World War I, one cannot but conclude that the pope was wise and the political leaders were fools.

The situation in Ukraine is different, but not entirely so. Many military analysts have noted conditions similar to World War I: static fronts, trenches and minefields, endless artillery bombardments, man-eating defensive positions. There's a political similarity as well. Ukrainian war aims, supported by NATO, seem disconnected from reality. Russia won't be expelled from the eastern oblasts of Ukraine. Moreover, events on the battlefield in 2023 and early 2024 suggest that Putin will succeed in his war aim of

preventing Ukraine from becoming a functional participant in an American-led military alliance.

Men can be thrown into battle and suffer defeat without rancor and resentment. Napoleon's ability to command the loyalty of men was not diminished by his disastrous retreat from Moscow. But feckless, incompetent, indifferent, and irresponsible leadership is a powerful acid that erodes a social organism. Thus my concern. The fruitless expenditure of human life in pursuit of unwinnable causes is among the most egregious failures of leadership. Is America courting that danger? Does our ardent support of Ukraine and our refusal to entertain diplomatic openings with Moscow amount to the irresponsible use of Ukrainian men as cannon fodder in pursuit of unattainable goals? If the answer is "yes" (and I worry that it is), then it will become increasingly difficult for the United States to exercise global leadership.

Desecration

O

n February 15, a large crowd gathered for the funeral of Cecilia Gentili, a former male prostitute who had refashioned himself as a woman and transgender activist. The ceremony took place in St. Patrick's Cathedral. More spectacle than funeral, it was not a somber event. One eulogy pronounced the deceased "Saint Cecilia, the mother of all whores," evoking cheers and rapturous applause. The atmosphere was that of a triumphant rally celebrating a progressive victory.

Gentili was known to declare: "I don't believe in God, but God wanted me to be always, always, the star of the show." No doubt he would have approved of the raucous event, which used the sacred setting of St. Patrick's to put a stick in the eye of any who object to the LGBTQ agenda of limitless liberation.

One wonders why the clerical authorities in New York accommodated what amounted to a deliberate mockery of the Church's teaching. Beforehand, the ever-predictable Fr. James Martin pronounced the ceremony "wonderful." Out of town and unable to attend, he told a reporter, "To celebrate the funeral Mass of a transgender woman at St. Patrick's is a powerful reminder, during Lent, that L.G.B.T.Q. people are as much a part of the church as anyone else." Ah, playing the "radical inclusion" card. One wonders what Fr. Martin's views (which he half-retracted the next day) would have been if the funeral had been for a noted white supremacist during which the crowd celebrated with loud, shameless cheering of his views.

No doubt the Archdiocese of New York was caught off guard. The funeral's organizer reported that Gentili's family kept the activist's gender-bending, role-playing identity "under wraps." The priest conducting the funeral cut it short. After the spectacle, the Archdiocese of New York put out a press release saying that the authorities had "no idea our welcome and prayer would be degraded in such a sacrilegious and deceptive way." I'm sure that's true. Nonetheless, I have the impression that a funeral at St. Patrick's is not like making a reservation at the local Olive Garden. It takes pull, which suggests that the lavender mafia in the central bureaucracy that administers the Archdiocese of New York knew exactly who Cecilia Gentili was, were complicit with the family's subterfuge, and ensured that the funeral got scheduled.

Gentili's family defended the event, saying that it "brought precious life and radical joy to the cathedral in historic defiance of the church's hypocrisy and anti-trans hatred." Against the notion that there was prevarication, they announced, "The only deception present at St. Patrick's Cathedral is that it claims to be a welcoming place for all." The family's bravado clarifies nicely the intent of the entire affair. *New York Times* writer Liam Stack gets it exactly right: The funeral was "an exuberant piece of political theater."

Our own Carl Trueman provides the best analysis of the cultural and spiritual meaning of the sacrilege staged in St. Patrick's Cathedral ("Desecration at St. Patrick's Cathedral"):

One obvious question is why an atheist man convinced that he is a woman and committed to a life of prostitution would wish to have a funeral in a church. One answer is that the struggle for the heart of a culture always takes place in two areas: time and space. As the Christian transformation of the Roman Empire was marked by the emergence of the liturgical calendar and the turning of pagan temples into churches, so we can expect the reverse to take place when a culture paganizes. The pagans will respond in kind. And so we have a month dedicated to Pride and church buildings used for the mockery of Christianity. Time and space are reimagined in ways that directly confront and annihilate that once deemed sacred. A funeral in a Catholic cathedral for an atheist culture warrior is a first-class way of doing this.

This goes to a point I have made before: Our age is not marked so much by disenchantment as by desecration. The culture's officer class is committed not merely to marginalizing that which previous generations considered sacred. It is committed to its

destruction. Disenchantment has passive connotations, a dull, impersonal, somewhat tedious but inevitable process. But desecration speaks to the exultation that active destruction of the holy involves. When Gentili is celebrated as a “great whore” in Spanish by trans rights advocate Liaam Winslet in a eulogy greeted with wild applause, then “desecration” seems the only word that captures both the blasphemy and the exhilaration of the moment.

We are foolish to downplay the spiritual exhilaration of breaking taboos and tearing down structures of authority. Do not underestimate the dark appeal of spiritual demolition. After all, angels founded hell.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ Writing about Richard Weaver this month brought me back to his delightful autobiographical essay, “Up From Liberalism.” He details his “conversion to the poetic and ethical vision of life” in a memorable paragraph:

I recall very sharply how, in the Autumn of 1939, as I was driving one afternoon across the monotonous prairies of Texas to begin my third year [of teaching at Texas A&M], it came to me like a revelation that I did not have to go back to this job, which had become distasteful, and that I did not have to go on professing the clichés of liberalism, which were becoming meaningless to me. I saw that my opinions had been formed out of a timorous regard for what was supposed to be intellectually respectable, and that I had always been looking over my shoulder to find out what certain others, whose concern with truth I was beginning to believe to be not very intense, were doing or thinking. It is a great experience to wake up at a critical juncture to the fact that one does have a free will, and that giving up the worship of false idols is a quite practicable proceeding.

To which I will add an important nugget of Weaver’s moral wisdom: “It is good for everyone to ally himself at one time with the defeated and to look at the ‘progress’ of history through the eyes of those who were left behind.” To do so brings a richer, more complete sense of the fullness of the human condition because “lost causes and impossible loyalties” are gateways to freedom. They allow us to wriggle free from the iron grip of prevailing measures of success and worth, to counter “the pragmatic verdict of the world.”

◆ In Weaver's spirit, I am presently reading (on the recommendation of Curtis Yarvin, underscored by Matthew Rose) *The Eastern Front*, the wartime memoirs of Léon Degrelle, a romantic Belgian nationalist who volunteered to fight the Soviets as part of a Walloon detachment of the German Wehrmacht's Waffen SS. His ambition was to defeat godless communism, redeem Belgium, and purify his soul with suffering and sacrifice. To fight with the Nazis as the highest moral and spiritual calling: It's hard to imagine a cause more lost and a loyalty more impossible.

◆ Since the beginning of the war in Gaza, the Egyptian government has deployed soldiers and armored vehicles to prevent Palestinian refugees from entering that country. As pressure has grown, Egypt has built a compound with towering concrete walls to contain any spillover of refugees. Their intent is to maintain a sealed border between Gaza and Egypt. Meanwhile, in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico . . .

◆ Speaking of discordant realities. Progressives call for a ceasefire in Gaza. There have been casualties in the hundred thousands in Ukraine. Not a peep about a ceasefire in that conflict.

◆ Analysis of survey data indicates that progressive "wisdom" about sexual experience and premarital cohabitation as important steps to take before entering into the marriage covenant turns out to be false. As the Institute for Family Studies puts it, "Overall, we found that 'sexually inexperienced' individuals, or those who have only had sex with their spouse, are most likely to be flourishing in marriage. These 'sexually inexperienced' individuals report the highest levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, sexual satisfaction, and emotional closeness with their spouses." Conversely, those who have had ten or more sexual partners report significantly lower marital satisfaction, and they suffer higher rates of divorce. For the full report, see "The Myth of Sexual Experience," composed by the Institute for Family Studies and published by BYU's Wheatley Institute.

◆ Nondenominational Protestant churches have grown in recent decades. In the early 1970s, less than 3 percent of American adults attended nondenominational churches. Since 2000, the percentage has increased steeply. At this point, 13 percent of American adults describe themselves as nondenominational Christians. Meanwhile, Protestant denominations have lost members. The shift reflects the broader loss of trust in institutions of all sorts, from marriage to the military. People still “do church,” but they conceive of their institutional affiliations in more fluid ways. One sees something similar in Catholicism. Two generations ago, it was taken for granted that you attended the parish in your neighborhood. In recent decades, more and more Catholics have chosen their parishes.

◆ Thomas McKenna reports that euthanasia proponents are preparing to sue St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver, British Columbia (“Pro-Euthanasia Activists to Sue Catholic Hospital in Canada,” *National Review*, February 3, 2024). The transgression: refusal to provide “assistance in dying,” the Canadian euphemism for the medical killing of patients. From Canadian law professor Daphne Gilbert: “It would be my hope the case would pave the way for ending the ability of religion to dictate health care.” Her ambition is to compel Catholic institutions to adhere to every dictate of the progressive magisterium. “Religious institutions would either have to decide to get out of the business of offering medical care—and it could be taken over by the province—or these institutions would have to align their care with the Constitution, even if it opposes their values.” Diversity, but only among the like-minded. Inclusion, but only of those who are “inclusive.” George Orwell would not be surprised.

◆ Undergraduate enrollment appears to be in the steepest decline on record. Between 2019 and 2022, enrollment fell by 8 percent. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the downward trend is continuing. It can be explained by demographic decline. Colleges are facing a smaller cohort of eighteen-year-olds. But that’s only part of the explanation. The sharp fall also reflects a decline in the number of high school graduates who are deciding to go to college. It’s hard to know how to interpret this trend. Are young people making prudent judgments about the value of higher education? More than 25 percent of students who start college end up dropping out. Others finish their degrees but take jobs that do not require a B.A. For them, college turns out to be an expensive prospect with little financial payoff. Whatever we make of the trend, we can be sure that university administrators are having sleepless nights. Fewer students mean less tuition revenue, a formula for bankruptcy.

◆ The Alabama Supreme Court recently ruled that frozen embryos are human persons subject to the protection of the law. The decision has roiled the assisted fertility industry, which some estimate currently has more than a million embryos in storage. Abortion proponents insist that a fertilized egg, which, if given the opportunity, possesses everything necessary to develop into a newborn child, is not a person. But surely they should worry about the commodification of the human genome. What kind of society develops a reserve supply of embryos—human material available for adults to use as they see fit?

◆ *Image* is calling it quits. Founded thirty-five years ago by Gregory Wolfe (author of a number of essays in *FIRST THINGS* over the years), the journal has sought to nourish our impoverished artistic and literary scene “by demonstrating the vitality of contemporary art and literature invigorated by religious faith.” We appreciate the many years of quiet Christian witness and regret the journal’s passing.

◆ Thirty-plus Harvard students went on a hunger strike to pressure the university to divest from Israel, joining a similar effort by students at Brown. They refused to eat for twelve hours. Not exactly Bobby Sands, an IRA member in a British prison who died after more than sixty days on hunger strike. To go along with their grade inflation, these Ivy Leaguers are subject to protest inflation: Ten minutes of hunger at Harvard and Brown equals an entire day.

◆ I dwelt upon the desecration of St. Patrick’s Cathedral above. The counter-response is consecration. Poetry consecrates language, shaping it to serve the unending human task of speaking truly about the world, our inner lives, and God. I am proud of our long history of publishing poetry. And I’m pleased to announce that we will expand our commitment to serving the Muses. In 2024 *FIRST THINGS* will launch an annual poetry prize, endowed through the generosity of the Tim & Judy Rudderow Foundation. We will award \$2,000 to the winning poet and \$1,000 to the runner-up. Entrants are asked to submit two original poems that are attentive to the demands of form. Poems should not exceed forty lines, and they must be unpublished and not under consideration

elsewhere. Submissions will open in May. The winners will be announced in August. We will of course publish the prizewinning poems in our pages.

◆ It's with a heavy heart that I must report the passing of Fr. Larry Bailey. A Lutheran pastor for many decades, Larry, along with Richard John Neuhaus, was a founder of the Community of Christ in the City, an ecumenical Christian sodality. In 1979 the Community purchased 338 East 19th Street, a modest town house that long ago had been cut up into small apartments. Both RJN and Larry lived for the rest of their lives in the modest abode, along with a steady stream of young people, who in one way or another were seeking a Christian vocation. Larry was famously the cook at the many dinners Richard hosted. After FIRST THINGS got going, our junior fellows became members of the Community, which fell under Larry's leadership after RJN's death in 2009. I enjoyed Larry's hospitality on many evenings, which often began with the recitation of evening office from the Lutheran Book of Worship and ended with after-dinner drinks. A man of deep faith, Larry touched many lives. I'm grateful to have known him. May he rest in peace.

May 2024

HITLER'S SECOND COMING

It was surreal. President Biden began his State of the Union speech by invoking the Nazi threat. More than eighty years ago, Biden reminded us, Franklin Roosevelt rallied the nation, as “Hitler was on the march,” and “freedom and democracy were under assault.” Today, the president warned, the fascist enemy rampages anew, not only on the world stage, but in America herself. This time the tyrant is Putin, while the dagger at the “throat of American democracy” is insurrection. “What makes our moment rare,” Biden intoned, “is that freedom and democracy are under attack—both at home and overseas at the very same time.”

On their face, Biden's claims are wildly irresponsible. He implies that Donald Trump and his supporters are not mere political opponents, but Hitlerian foes and traitors. With rhetoric like that coming from a sitting president as he speaks to the nation, it's no wonder that our politics is bitterly divisive and our society polarized. What is the greater threat to democracy: a ragtag mob in the Capitol, or a major political party that defines political opposition as treason?

The allure of this way of talking seems irresistible to liberal elites, even as it damages the body politic. Hitler, fascism, Nazism: There's rarely an issue of *The Atlantic* or a week of editorials in the *New York Times* that doesn't mine the 1930s for analogies. It's as if we were living a collective version of the film *Groundhog Day*. It's always 1939.

At this late date, the resort to Hitler suggests a decadent political culture, a case of arrested development. The Civil War had concluded less than seventy years before Herbert Hoover ran for reelection in 1932. Yet neither he nor his opponent, Franklin Roosevelt, regularly used that conflict to frame the choice that faced the nation. Jefferson Davis was not deemed the specter haunting the American people. Hitler's body was consumed by flames in his bunker in Berlin nearly eighty years ago, and yet he still lives in our political imaginations as an ever-present threat. Biden was a toddler in 1945, unconscious of world events when Hitler died. Yet he and his speechwriters make ready appeal, confident that listeners will find Hitler and his misdoings salient to our times.

Renaud Camus is a *mauvais garçon* in the French literary scene. He's not afraid to speak inconvenient truths and expose the self-deceptions of the establishment. He has meditated on the phrase “the second career of Adolf Hitler.” The dictator's first career, which played out in Germany during the years of the Third Reich, ended in death and defeat. In the 1960s, Hitler attained a second life, this time as the incarnation of evil. His

name was deployed “as an absolute weapon of language, as its supreme fulmination, the atomic bomb of maledictions.” Dread of Hitler’s return exercised an almost totalitarian power, “a dread,” Camus notes, “that proved a tremendously effective mode of presence for this consummate dictator.” The West threw itself into anti-racism and anti-colonialism as sacred projects. Longstanding authorities and traditional forms of life were held in suspicion, interrogated for signs of latent fascism. Patriarchy, homophobia, and the rest became further forms of Hitlerian abomination. The work is ongoing. “Europe is like a patient who has suffered from a terrible cancer—Hitlerism—and who is endlessly operated on and reoperated on by terrifically thorough, if perhaps not always very professional, surgeons.” The mildest symptoms trigger the most extreme procedures.

Pierre Manent has dubbed this establishment extremism the “fanaticism of the center.” We see it in action today. The populace manifests discontent. Polling shows hostility toward mass migration. Populist politicians enjoy support. Against this threat, the establishment turns to Hitler, the peril with which to bludgeon those who object to elite governance. Vladimir Putin invades Ukraine, and the second coming of Hitler plays a role here as well. He ensures that anyone who urges negotiation and compromise will be denounced as a naive appeaser or treacherous quisling. One must not sup with the devil!

I lack Camus’s literary élan. In *Return of the Strong Gods*, I offer a more pedestrian explanation for Hitler’s continuing relevance to contemporary political and cultural affairs. The bloody years from 1914 to 1945 were a civilizational catastrophe for the West. As the victors, American liberals blamed the war on the “closed society,” the social form that prized solidarity and obeyed authority. The designated remedy was an “open society” that encouraged “open minds.” The title of Karl Popper’s influential book framed the agenda: *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The tacit violence of Popper’s title (elaborated at length in his relentless attack on Plato, which amounts to a denunciation of nearly the entire philosophical tradition of the West) indicates the imperial, indeed paradoxically totalitarian, ambitions of the open-society consensus. Its Manichean logic recapitulates National Socialism, simply inverting the latter’s ambitions. The future of the West requires defeating internal enemies, excising cancerous growths—otherwise, Hitler might return.

The men and women who promoted the open-society consensus after World War II were generally moderate. But from the outset, the consensus had a utopian character: to create a world in which another Hitler would be impossible. And like all utopian projects, this one lost touch with reality over time. We cannot in fact organize our lives around the ideal of the “open mind.” And we certainly cannot sustain an actually existing society if we treat “openness” as the highest good. Political correctness and cancel culture grew out of open-society liberalism. They are punitive strategies and disciplinary regimes that protect the open-society consensus from reality-based

criticism. Concerned about social cohesion in our era of mass migration? You're a racist. Sympathetic to populist politicians? You're a fascist.

Biden's uses of these maledictions are ham-handed. He never does with a scalpel what he can do with a machete. The opening of his State of the Union is more than tiresome, though—it's troubling. The year is 2024, not 1939. We face very significant challenges—rampant mental illness, declines in marriage and fertility, mass migration, runaway environmental ideologies, deindustrialization, global instability, and more—and we can't address them until we let go of Adolf Hitler. Indeed, some of those problems fester because of our fixation on him. A culture that puts the memory of Nazism at the center of its self-understanding is almost certain to slide toward nihilism. It's time to bring Hitler's second career to an end.

Winds of Change are Blowing

The Holy Spirit is at work in Finland. As in other Nordic countries, church membership in Finland has plummeted in recent decades. But fifteen-to-twenty-nine-year-old men are bucking the trend. Only 5 percent of men in that age group attended church monthly in 2011. In 2019 participation rose to 12 percent. Self-reported regular prayer shows a similar increase among young men, as does belief in God. In 2011, 16 percent of young men said they prayed at least once a week; in 2019 the rate jumped to 26 percent. Belief in God leaped from 19 percent to 43 percent over the same eight-year period. Survey data show no increase of religiosity among women, whose monthly church attendance was lower than that of men in 2011 (3 percent) and remained low in 2019 (4 percent).

One should be cautious about interpreting trends, especially in faraway countries. But the uptick in Gen Z religiosity in Finland, especially among males, mirrors phenomena I observe in America.

There's a great deal of discontent among the young. It's apparent in woke radicalism, which traffics in condemnations of nearly all of Western culture (settler colonialism, systemic racism, patriarchy, and other sins). The widespread use of antidepressants and other medications suggests a glum dissatisfaction with the way things are going. A veto of the status quo is not limited to those who are depressed and despairing, or to those who lean left. As many commentators have pointed out, a growing number of Gen Z folks, especially males, lurk in the shadowy world of dissident right extremism. In those circles, the conversation is far more hostile to conventional attitudes and mainstream politics than is the subsidized radicalism you find in the local university's black studies and womanist programs.

I sympathize with the alienation. America is a rich country, far richer than when I was coming of age. But life is lousy for young people. If your parents are rich and ambitious

on your behalf, you'll be fed into the spiritual meat grinder of meritocratic competition at school, travel teams in sports, and endless activities aiming at enrichment. If your parents are middle-class, they're likely to be divorced. You probably attend public schools, which are run in accord with therapeutic principles that ask very little of you. Meanwhile, the smartphone colonizes your mind. If you have the misfortune to be poor, your parents won't have married, mom will be on her third live-in boyfriend, and some of your friends will have drowned in the ocean of cheap fentanyl. As for love and romance, the dating game is almost entirely dysfunctional across all social classes. The country's political culture isn't healthy, either; it has been poisoned by sanctimonious Baby Boomers. Institutions are not trustworthy; employment is nakedly transactional.

In view of the pervasive sense of betrayal, I'm surprised that so few young people are radicalized. Most cynically conform, vaguely satisfied with the material consolations our system offers. Dining out! Travel! But if a recent university graduate or thoughtful young pipe fitter has a spirited nature and refuses to conform, the traditional avenues of progressive rebellion do not appeal. They have become just as professionalized as the professions. Barack Obama's career indicates that the job of "community organizer" is now part of the grueling process of résumé-building. Today, the landscape on the left is confined and constricted; open spaces and unimpeded vistas are on the "right."

I put scare quotes around "right" because I do not want to be misunderstood. In the United States, political conservatism has roots in classical liberalism. As a consequence, it emphasizes freedom, especially free markets. But this is an American anomaly. In the larger context of the modern West, the party of authority occupies the right, while the party of liberation occupies the left.

In previous columns, I've mentioned Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sketch of modern politics. He characterizes it as a contest (fruitful in his reckoning) between the Party of Permanency and the Party of Change. In this dialectic, the Party of Permanency is not animated by a witless "fear of change," as so many progressives like to think, nor is it mired in a pathological "rigidity," as the pope often says. Rather, those on the right recognize that obedience can be an engine of transcendence. When we submit to legitimate authority, we're drawn outside ourselves to serve something higher than our self-interest. This ecstatic dynamic, this "going out" of ourselves, is a necessary condition for nobility of soul.

As I detail in *Return of the Strong Gods*, the open-society consensus and small-minded, debunking gestures of "critical thinking" have stripped our society of legitimate authority. God is treated as an oppressive illusion. The nation is a racist conspiracy with origins in settler colonialism. Marriage has been redefined beyond recognition. Not even nature herself is permitted to issue her gentle commands concerning what it means to

be born as male or female. As a consequence, we are abandoned to our unruly desires, now liberated, while at the same time enslaved to a technocratic regime of utility-maximization. Neither path leads to self-possession, which can be attained only in and through obedience to something higher than oneself.

Woke activism has great appeal because it serves as a seemingly noble cause. Fight racism! Defend transgender rights! Save the planet! From the River to the Sea! But as I note above, this option suffers from its success. A smart young person recognizes that fully funded activism (the kind that helps you gain admission to Ivy League schools) hardly counts as an adventure of the soul. Moreover, the woke agenda and other progressive programs are political. Transforming society is not the same as the interior drama of love and devotion. As a consequence, when the desire to live for something other than oneself awakens in a young person, given the cultural and political realities of our time, he's likely to turn rightward and seek what I call the "strong gods."

Most people follow the herd. Progressivism is sure to maintain its hegemony, at least in the short and medium term. But the old adventures of liberation have become clichés. Allen Ginsberg got establishment accolades before he died, and that was a generation ago. Today the thrill of danger, visions of heroic self-sacrifice, and the romance of transcendence are to be found in the burning embers of authority. Jordan Peterson's remarkable ascent a few years ago was a harbinger; the popularity of the Latin Mass among young Catholics is a sign. Young men in Finland and elsewhere are not going to church in order to "turn back the clock." Students are not reading Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt and entertaining integralist and postliberal theories because they "fear change." They want to stoke their metaphysical imaginations and find their way out of the spiritual poverty of the late-modern West. However much I fear the false prophets and excesses of passion that are sure to come, I share their hopes and ambitions.

Second Thoughts

It makes for arresting reading. Nobel prize-winning economist Angus Deaton has been a practicing economist for fifty years. In a recent column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he explains that he has changed his mind about a number of important matters, among them the following:

Our emphasis on the virtues of free, competitive markets and exogenous technical change can distract us from the importance of power in setting prices and wages, in choosing the direction of technical change, and in influencing politics to change the rules of the game. Without an analysis of power, it is hard to understand inequality or much else in modern capitalism.

Put simply, there's more to economics than economics. Without considerations of political economy, an economist cannot give an accurate account of actually existing economies.

"We often equate well-being to money or consumption, missing much of what matters to people. In current economic thinking, individuals matter much more than relationships between people in families or in communities." In other words, never trust an economist who hasn't read Aristotle and Augustine. He operates with an impoverished account of the motives that drive us: our interests, desires, and aspirations.

An impoverished, "economistic" anthropology gives rise to theoretically elegant explanations that turn out to be true only in narrowly circumscribed situations, while the big picture remains obscure, or even distorted by efforts to shoehorn complex realities into narrow economic frameworks. As Deaton confesses, "Historians, who understand about contingency and about multiple and multidirectional causality, often do a better job than economists of identifying important mechanisms that are plausible, interesting, and worth thinking about, even if they do not meet the inferential standards of contemporary applied economics." As John Henry Newman noted, only small truths can be proven; consequential matters must be weighed and judged, an art improved by the acquisition of general knowledge. The best economists are able to think in more than economic terms. Witness Albert Hirschman and Karl Polanyi.

Deaton puts forward some specific reconsiderations. They concern the neoliberal consensus that has reigned supreme for the last fifty years. Deaton's second thoughts are explosive.

In the past, Deaton regarded labor unions as a drag on economic efficiency and thought their demise a net gain for society. Now he thinks otherwise.

Unions once raised wages for members and nonmembers, they were an important part of social capital in many places, and they brought political power to working people. . . . Their decline is contributing to the falling wage share [of firm profits], to the widening gap between executives and workers, to community destruction, and to rising populism.

Might it be the case that in our particular moment in history we would be well served by legislation that encourages private sector unions? For everything there is a season.

Deaton has second thoughts, too, about one of the pillars of globalist thinking. "I am much more skeptical of the benefits of free trade to American workers and"—here comes

the bombshell—“am even skeptical of the claim, which I and others have made in the past, that globalization was responsible for the vast reduction of global poverty over the past 30 years.” He speculates that India and China would have experienced rapid growth without the American-designed global system of free trade. Then comes a mea culpa: “I had also seriously underthought my ethical judgments about trade-offs between domestic and foreign workers.” All of us, including green-eyeshade economists, have obligations to our fellow citizens. A generic love of humanity sounds high-minded, but it is not.

What about immigration? Deaton has changed his mind on this topic as well. “I used to subscribe to the near consensus among economists that immigration to the US was a good thing, with great benefits to the migrants and little or no cost to domestic low-skilled workers. I no longer think so.” He observes that economic inequality was high during the Gilded Age, when few limits were placed on immigration; it fell as restrictions were imposed, then rose again when they were lifted, beginning with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Like globalization, open borders come at a significant cost to the most vulnerable Americans.

Late in his life, Augustine dictated his second thoughts, his *Retractationes*, which are detailed and extensive. Deaton’s reconsiderations are short. But they are consequential. One hopes that many others who constructed and justified the economic consensus of the last fifty years will have the courage to do the same.

Religion in Public Life

Polarization has become a watchword. But a recent Pew survey of the role of religion in public life (“8 in 10 Americans Say Religion is Losing Influence in Public Life”) indicates that Americans agree about at least one thing: Religion is, indeed, losing influence. It does not matter whether you are Christian or atheist, a Protestant or None, Democrat or Republican: A super-majority of those surveyed (80 percent) say that the social influence of religion is waning. Public discourse in America is being secularized.

The Pew researchers are delicate. They use the term “religion.” But in view of American reality, “religion” means Christianity. True, the term “Judeo-Christian” gained popularity in the 1950s, but it was adopted as an inclusive gesture, not a sociological observation. There can be no dispute that Christianity, especially Protestantism, has shaped American society. It is this legacy of influence over America’s laws, mores, and sentiments that is waning, as we all recognize.

What are we to make of the recession of Christianity from public life? Here, a great divide opens up. Those who identify as Christian are overwhelmingly likely to regard the

trend as a bad one. Those who are not Christian hold the opposite view. They see Christianity's diminished influence as a good development.

Readers will not be surprised to learn that the divide is a partisan one. Sixty-eight percent of Republicans (and those leaning Republican) regret religion's declining influence, while only 33 percent of Democrats (and those leaning Democrat) do so. The divide is also generational. Younger respondents are far more likely to cheer Christianity's decline than are older respondents.

The two sides don't just disagree; they fear each other. The Pew researchers formulate a pointed contrast. One category, conservative Christians, combines those who identify as Christian with those who describe themselves as politically conservative. The other category, the secular liberals, combines the religiously unaffiliated with the politically liberal. Among conservative Christians, 73 percent say that secular liberals are too active and too influential in public affairs, especially in debates about public schools. Eighty-eight percent of secular liberals say the same thing about conservative Christians.

In the Pew survey, 27 percent of respondents fall into the conservative Christian category. That's more than one quarter of all American adults. By contrast, only 12 percent are secular liberals. But as James Davison Hunter, Aaron Renn, and many others have noted, numbers do not translate into influence. Secular liberals may represent only one-eighth of the country, but they control our influential, mainstream institutions. Secular liberals determine what counts as "responsible" and what must be dismissed as "extremist." For this reason, we live in what Renn calls a "Negative World," one in which the most powerful people in society regard Christianity as an unfortunate legacy that must be suppressed.

The Pew survey also asked respondents about Christian nationalism. Pew reports that more than half of them have never heard of Christian nationalism. This group includes 60 percent of those who identify as Christian. Additionally, in the Christian cohort, only 5 percent report having heard "a great deal" about the topic. Put simply, Christians are not talking about Christian nationalism. The religious unaffiliated were more likely than Christians to have heard of Christian nationalism, and they were *twice* as likely to have heard "a great deal" about it (10 percent as compared to 5 percent). These results vindicate Kenneth Woodward's assessment in this issue ("The Myth of White Christian Nationalism"): The ruckus over Christian nationalism has been astroturfed by the left. This made-up controversy keeps liberals in a state of frenzied anxiety about a looming theocratic takeover.

Persons, Not Property

Last month I noted the Alabama Supreme Court ruling in a case about the destruction of embryos. The embryos had been created by a fertility clinic. Some were implanted in women who had contracted with the IVF clinic. Others were frozen and stored for future use. In December 2020 a patient at the hospital where the clinic is located gained access to the storage unit, put his hand in, and grabbed some embryos, which were thereby destroyed. Three couples whose embryos were involved filed a civil lawsuit to collect damages, arguing that the IVF clinic had been negligent in failing to protect the stored embryos. They made their argument under Alabama's Wrongful Death of a Minor Act, which Alabama's high court determined to apply in this case.

Uproar ensued. Progressives pounced on the ruling and broadcasted to the public that it represented an assault on the practice of IVF. Careful legal scholars have pointed out that the ruling is narrow. It concerns how to characterize the interests of couples who have engaged the services of fertility clinics. Are we to say that the embryos are the property of the couple? At first glance, pro-abortion zealots would seem happy to answer in the affirmative. But perhaps not, for such a judgment brings back unhappy memories of a time in American history when human beings of a certain race were treated as property.

Consider what the Alabama court had to adjudicate. The couples who litigated had had successful pregnancies by means of IVF. But imagine that one of the women had been hit by a drunk driver during her first month of pregnancy and suffered an injury that caused her to lose her child. She would be able to litigate for damages under the Wrongful Death of a Minor Act. Are we to suppose, therefore, that the frozen embryos awaiting implantation are ontologically different from the implanted embryos, so much so that the embryos are "property" until such time as an adult decides to "use" him or her?

Although I regard the practice of IVF as wrong, I have sympathy for those who employ modern science in this way. The burden of infertility can be great. And I have pity, because men and women who engage in the artificial production of embryos are flirting with morally grievous matters. As the Alabama case brought to the fore, either the "products" of IVF are property or they are persons. To call the surplus embryos "property" indicates that IVF creates human life so as to manipulate and use it to suit the desires of adults. To allow that frozen embryos are persons forces us to confront the reality of IVF, which some experts say currently has one million persons on ice in the United States.

At the test of the first atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer recalled a line from the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds." We are on the cusp of a very different but equally daunting scientific revolution in reproductive technology.

IVF and its Faustian manipulation of life are but the first act. Where is the Union of Concerned Scientists when we need them?

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ Schoolchildren are being taught to diagram sentences: Authoritarianism is on the march. *New Yorker* writer Emma Green's assessment isn't so dire. But in her recent essay, "Have the Liberal Arts Gone Conservative?," she notes a decidedly right-wing tilt in the classical school movement. High school students in New York public schools read Michelle Obama's memoir, while classical school kids read Aristotle and Dante. Critics are quick to deride classical education as the province of rich white folks. But in recent years, classical charter schools have opened in places like the South Bronx, with non-white parents clamoring for seats for their children. The assistant superintendent of a group of classical charter middle schools there expressed an old-school goal: "We're building students that are not just going to be academic robots but moms and dads someday." I can hear the outcries coming from faculty lounges: Patriarchy! Neo-fascism! Progressives are not wrong to worry. As Green observes, "In classical schools, inclusion isn't necessarily the highest virtue." That's what happens when educators make truth-seeking the highest virtue.

◆ An amusing meme from social media: "Am I really a Nazi fascist extremist or am I just a normal person from 15 years ago?"

◆ David Rieff writes in his Substack column, *Desire and Fate*:

Huxley thought that people would need to be provided with the pharmacological equivalent of bread and circuses. But social media is a far more addictive compound for through it we have succeeded in accomplishing the seemingly impossible in the annals of enslavement . . . : becoming our own bread and circuses.

◆ The progressive commissars at Valparaiso University offered something interesting during Holy Week:

The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and the Office of Multicultural Programs, would like to celebrate Women's History Month with all self-identified women, and non-binary people who are significantly female-identified at Valparaíso University. We invite you to take a break in your day and join us in a relaxing activity during this special month.

On Wednesday, March 27, 2024, we will be having two massage therapists available on campus to provide free chair massages to all faculty and staff. This is a great opportunity to relieve some stress, recharge your energy, and show some appreciation for all the hard work you do.

“Significantly *female-identified*”? Sanity seems in short supply at Valpo—but rest assured, “snacks will be provided.”

◆ On March 8, Irish voters rejected an elite-driven effort to amend the Irish Constitution. The proposed changes would have brought Ireland more completely into the Rainbow Reich. One change would have defined family as resting on “durable relationships”—in effect, cohabiting couples or, for that matter, any configuration. (The mainstream media have been fascinated by polyamory of late.) The other amendment would have replaced reference to a mother’s duties in the home with a more generic clause about care provided by family members. The vote was not close. Sixty-seven percent voted against adding “durable relationships”; 73 percent voted against striking the term “mother.”

Ireland’s political and cultural leaders were shocked by the outcome. Polling had suggested support for the changes. As it turned out, voters were hiding their true sentiments, which is not surprising, given the atmosphere of intimidation that silences and shames anyone who dissents from the Rainbow agenda. Before the vote, Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar (who has since stepped down as his party’s leader) said that a vote against the changes would be a “step backwards” and urged Ireland to put aside “very old-fashioned language” about women. Apparently, “mother” is a word that’s on the wrong side of history.

◆ I’ve long thought Portugal a vivid example of the decline that haunts the West. In the mid-1970s, a revolution overturned the decades-long rule of a civilian dictatorship, after which the leftist government renounced Portugal’s colonies. The country joined the

European Union in 1986 and adopted the Euro in 1999. Now it is a vassal state in the European system, and few questions of economic or cultural consequence are decided in Lisbon. Brussels calls the shots. It's quite remarkable: Portugal went from empire to colony in one generation. Apparently, Portuguese young people are unhappy. In early March, as the Irish were giving the Rainbow *Gauleiters* a black eye, their votes catapulted Chega, a new national conservative party, to a strong third place finish in Portugal's national elections.

◆ A pithy (and true) observation from Fr. Robert Imbelli on the effects of liberal theology: No wrath + no sin + no Cross + no Christ = Nones.

◆ Fr. Imbelli is riffing on a famous line from H. Richard Niebuhr about theological liberalism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."

◆ Against the notion that pivoting toward an "inclusive" approach to homosexuality involves only a limited modification of Christian morality, Larry Chapp argues that it implicates the Church in a profound change in theological anthropology, one oriented toward idolatry. Writing on his Substack, *What We Need Now*:

In other words, the entire LGBTQ movement is a counter religion, which accounts for why it is held with a deep religious fervor and why it is always accompanied by a deep loathing for the traditional Christian construal of the sacramental anthropology of the sex act. The rainbow flag is, therefore, much more than a mere symbol of sexual diversity but is also the central icon of a new religion.

◆ Darel Paul writing in *Compact* magazine:

President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are counting on these under-30 (mostly) childless voters—especially women—to return them to office in November. This demographic contributes the shock troops of the Permanent Sexual Revolution. A clear majority of American women under 30 (61 percent) now

identify as feminists, and pluralities of them say they are “not interested in dating” (43 percent) and that abortion should be legal “under any circumstances” (48 percent). No surprise, then, that Biden threatened the US Supreme Court in his recent State of the Union address with “the power of women.” Or that Harris visited a Minnesota abortion clinic this month, becoming the first sitting veep ever to do so.

◆ In his Back Page column last month (“Boundless Prayer”), Ephraim Radner commended the anchoring place of prayer, which is broad enough to have room for every aspect of our lives, good and ill. He cited Psalm 118:9. A careful reader wrote, observing that Radner surely meant Psalm 18:19: “He brought me forth into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me.” Radner confirms that, yes, the correction is correct.

June/July 2024

DIAGNOSING DISASTER

Why Did We Destroy Europe?” It’s an arresting title, chosen by Michael Polanyi for a 1970 essay that looks back on the conflagrations that consumed Europe between 1914 and 1945. (The essay can be found in *Society, Economics & Philosophy*, a posthumous volume of selected papers by Polanyi.) The short answer: “a fierce moral skepticism fired by moral indignation.”

The skepticism arises from the critical thrust of modern thought. Already in the seventeenth century, philosophers were judging inherited modes of thought and patterns of life to be irrational. Descartes compared the traditional knowledge of his time to a medieval town, with crooked lanes and houses built here and there without a coherent plan. Reform was impossible. Better to raze the town and start anew, this time in accord with reason.

Hostility to the status quo increased in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rousseau regarded existing society as a vicious conspiracy against our humanity. Jeremy Bentham formulated the philosophy of utilitarianism, which finds wanting all existing laws, traditions, and mores. Everything must be demolished and rebuilt in accord with a single moral maxim, the greatest good for the greatest number.

This is what Polanyi means by “fierce moral skepticism”: All that we inherit is guilty until proven innocent at the bar of unsullied nature, pure reason, and objective science. Polanyi notes a persistent characteristic of this approach. It accords moral prestige to outrage, protest, and revolution. Society is a cesspool of irrationality and injustice. No measure is beyond the pale, as long as it expunges the grave evils besetting society.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moral indignation served an optimistic view of the future. Reformers pivoted from searing criticism of the status quo to hopeful accounts of the new society to be midwived by reason and science. Once we were freed from ignorance and superstition, the better angels of our nature would take over. The past might be filled with cruelty and darkness, but the future would bring sweetness and light.

Polanyi was a professor of chemistry, a discipline that made him fully aware of the way in which science can shape our metaphysical imaginations. Scientific explanations are reductive. They rest on the assumption that the driving forces of the universe are impersonal and indifferent to human concerns about meaning and morality.

As a consequence, the rationalistic optimism of nineteenth-century progressivism was foredoomed. Reformers insisted that once the necessary demolition of our social system was complete, science would serve as the instrument of social reconstruction. But science offers no moral wisdom. Science analyzes; it does not guide and inspire. The French positivist Auguste Comte recognized as much, which is why he invented a new religion, the Religion of Humanity, to take the place of Christianity in his utopian scheme. Reason destroys, but it does not govern; rather, a new mystification arises. In the twentieth century, it was given a less than noble name: “propaganda.”

Polanyi calls this dynamic “moral inversion.” Modernity’s zeal for scientific critique destroys the moral traditions of the West. These critical techniques readily unmask these putatively baseless traditions, but that’s all. What they cannot do is create new foundations. Into the resulting vacuum rushes a moralistic pseudoscience.

Karl Marx offers a particularly clear example. His reductive scientism is complete. While writing a biography of him, Isaiah Berlin researched Marx’s manuscripts. Berlin observed (as Polanyi cites him) that the communist philosopher marked up the socialist manifestos of his time, vigorously crossing out appeals to rights and statements of the principles of justice. In the margins he penned fierce comments denouncing these moral terms as bourgeois ideology.

Hostility to moral language arose from Marx’s scientific reductionism. As he stipulates in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” Economic conditions determine what we believe, including our beliefs about right and wrong. As history marches forward, moral truth changes accordingly.

In itself, the reduction of morality to economic conditions leads to the conclusion that there exist no transcendent truths by which to judge this or any other society. Marx solves the problem of relativism by boasting that he has discovered an objective science of history. This science purports to demonstrate the inevitable triumph of the proletariat and the inauguration of the end of history, which fulfills our humanity. In this way, Marxism does not condemn capitalism on moral grounds; it claims to serve the “objective” necessity of capitalism’s overthrow in order to usher in the “objective” truth of communism. As Polanyi observes, “Such an ideology simultaneously satisfies both the demands for scientific objectivity and the ideals of social justice, by interpreting man and history in terms of power and profit, while injecting into this materialistic reality the messianic passion for a free and righteous society.” The “science” of critique demolishes all current moral principles and political ideals. New imperatives take their

place. But they are not moral; rather, they are “scientific.” They express the “laws of history,” which are as ruthlessly fixed as the law of gravity.

The upshot is moral nihilism. Armed with skepticism about the justice of present arrangements, “progressive” men give no quarter to the status quo. It must be destroyed without qualm. Those who hold power in the bourgeois order are merely masking their privilege with “ideals.” The agents of change, therefore, must be clear-minded. They should wield power so as to destroy power. Polanyi notes that such an attitude provides “moral justification for violence as the only honest mode of political action.” Lenin never disguised this logic. He once said, “Morality is what serves to destroy the old exploiting society.” Assassination, mass murder, torture—these are means justified by the demands of “historical necessity.”

Polanyi notes that Nazism differed from communism in its determination of the driving force of history. Rather than resting on economic relations, Nazism sprang from a neoromantic blood-and-soil philosophy. But the upshot is similar. Like communists, Nazis derided liberal principles as weak and dishonest, and they relished violence as the honest refusal of the moral precepts that limit human action. Immorality becomes a higher morality. (Nietzsche often speaks this way.) Transgression gave birth to “the new,” the hoped-for future that realized the inner greatness of the individual (Nietzsche and countless bohemian artists and wannabe individualists), or of humanity (communism), or of the German people (Nazism).

The word “nihilism” is open-ended. In its strict philosophical sense, it denotes the denial of real existence: The world is founded on chaos, meaninglessness, and the void. In its moral and political sense, “nihilism” refers to a mentality that does not simply reject all norms and values as false and baseless, but aims to destroy their role and influence in society. In contrast to ancient skepticism and Epicureanism, which counseled calm acceptance, moral and political nihilism motivates an angry disposition, one bent on annihilation. Here is how the early twentieth-century French surrealist André Breton described his movement (which echoes the Russian radicalism of the previous century): “We were possessed by a will to total subversion.”

In Polanyi’s account, we destroyed Europe because we were bewitched by a perverted science. Its critical power stoked our outrage, drawing us toward moral and political nihilism. We seduced ourselves with imaginings of a saving science (communism) or a pure deed (Nazism and other movements). Hope was transmuted into belief in a redemptive “necessity” that was immune from critical examination: History, the People, Blood, the Will. But there can be no saving science. Nor are there pure deeds. Sinful men can be restrained only by moral discipline. Society can be governed humanely only by means of considered moral judgments. Having annihilated the past, which is the wellspring of wisdom, the West not only lost its defenses against the barbarians within.

Much worse, it created some of the most destructive barbarians, “armed bohemians,” as Polanyi calls them. Armed with moral indignation and infused with an urgency that would not countenance moral constraints, they brought cataclysm and disaster.

The fact that we’re doing so again troubles my sleep.

Postmortems After Auschwitz

I’d like to write a book about the soul-searching that was undertaken after World War II. During the early postwar years, Hannah Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Many other books fall into the genre. In *Return of the Strong Gods*, I discuss Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) and Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). I also treat *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), an extremely influential book that conveyed the results of an extended study by a group of social scientists and Theodor Adorno. Their approach and conclusions echoed the analysis pioneered by Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 1933) and Erich Fromm (*Escape from Freedom*, 1941).

In truth, the list of postmortems of disaster is nearly endless. From the 1930s through the first decades of the postwar era, many sought to understand the civilizational catastrophe that engulfed the West. Christopher Dawson (*The Making of Europe*, 1932) and T. S. Eliot (*The Idea of a Christian Society*, 1939) viewed the recession of Christianity with foreboding. They recognized that culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum. A millennium ago, the love society of the Church had tamed the warrior society. The victory was not permanent. Unless the leaven of the gospel is renewed in every generation, hard men willing to do hard things will be ascendant.

Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) should be read as a meditation on Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Weaver blames William of Ockham and the nominalist view of truth. In the Catholic tradition, too, this account was often advanced as a general explanation of modern perversions and evils. A young Jacques Maritain wrote a book in this genre, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (1928). Étienne Gilson advanced the anti-nominalist thesis in a more erudite fashion in a book that influenced Weaver, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (1936).

The question of what went wrong was so pressing that answers crop up in surprising places. As a graduate student in the late 1980s, I was taken aback when I read *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach’s account of the rise of narrative realism. In the book’s final pages, Auerbach reveals that he intends his richly detailed analysis as a preparation for understanding the rise of Nazism. The brutalities of modern ideology reflect the tyranny of the “single formula,” which runs roughshod over the unique particularity of the human person. Moreover, the literary

culture of the twentieth century was captive to the “impression of hopelessness” and prone to delight in portraying the human condition “under its most brutal aspects.” As a result, literature had not played its role as defender of reality in all its vulnerable texture. Auerbach’s claims about the literary causes of Auschwitz seem a stretch, the sort of thing only an academic can believe. Yet when I put down the book, I found myself unable to reject his assessment. I came to see that Auerbach was advancing a literary version of the more theologically explicit diagnoses provided by Dawson and Eliot.

More theological still was the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. His star rose in the 1950s because he helped readers understand the importance of the doctrines of original sin and divine providence. We cannot author a utopian “new beginning.” The undertow of self-love is too great. We can only do what little good is within our power, trusting in God to ensure the triumph of justice on his timetable, not ours. Niebuhr also saw that an optimistic, liberal mindset had disarmed us in the face of grave evils. Auschwitz was authored by evil men, to be sure, but their path was made clear by naive men.

Michael Polanyi deserves his own chapter. I’ve described his analysis above. There’s more to say. He understood the allure of modern science. Its promise of truth, adamant, pure, and objective, can bewitch us. Yet “science” is an abstraction. It knows nothing. It is a discipline, a method. Only human beings know. Truth remains a mere possibility unless we grasp it, affirm it, and remain loyal to it. In *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958), his most widely read book, Polanyi details our dependence on intuitions, sentiments, and prejudices. He calls these ways of knowing “tacit knowledge,” on which we depend to make reliable judgments concerning truth. Knowing is an art, in which we must be trained. The tragedy of modernity lies in our exaltation of science at the expense of other ways of knowing. We have failed to educate our souls (an education Plato recognized as essential for philosophy), and as a result we have made ourselves vulnerable to all manner of seductions.

By my reading, a great deal of what Leo Strauss wrote chimes with Polanyi. His wartime lecture “German Nihilism” identifies the peril of an intellectual culture that, however sophisticated, is unwilling to dwell patiently with perennial questions of truth and goodness. Deprived of an encounter with “the classical ideal of humanity,” the best and brightest students hearken to political prophets and modern witch doctors of the soul. Strauss’s distinctive pedagogy sought to remedy this metaphysical deficiency. It required close (noncritical in the modern sense) readings of premodern books. It’s controversial to say so, but after World War II Martin Heidegger’s gnomic writings expressed views that seem quite different but in fact were similar. Both men recoiled from the nihilism implicit in modern scientific culture. And both conjured metaphysical substance that they could not quite bring themselves to believe in, even as they insisted on its necessity.

I've mentioned Richard Weaver. In the American context, his voice was eccentric. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was more typical. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949) was not written as a postmortem for Europe. Schlesinger sought to shape the postwar liberal consensus in the United States. But the social analysis he used to frame the challenges facing the country was widely believed to be the best way to understand the turmoil of the first decades of the twentieth century. Schlesinger saw a central tension in modern life. (The great sociologist Émile Durkheim had identified this tension a generation earlier.) We cherish the new freedoms of an open, liberal society and we enjoy the fruits of a dynamic capitalist economy, but we also seek continuity and belonging. Responsible leadership involves sustaining a balance between freedom and solidarity—the vital center.

The notion that we must balance change and continuity, individualism and belonging, played an important role in my education. By and large, this analysis was the canonical explanation of Nazism for most postwar Americans. (In my youth, communism was largely excused by establishment liberals.) Europe had been shipwrecked because it lost the proper balance. Demoralized by defeat, disoriented by democracy, buffeted by inflation, the German people felt unmoored, and they overcorrected toward an authoritarian and ethnocentric sense of belonging. Our job was to keep things in balance.

In his own postwar book, *The Quest for Community* (1953), Robert Nisbet warned that what seemed like a snug middle-class culture in America was in fact a dangerously atomized and lonely place. Others emphasized the inhumanity of modern industrial society. James Burnham foresaw the triumph of a cold-blooded technocratic elite in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). Burnham's account informed George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which is perhaps the most widely read and influential diagnosis of the self-immolation of the West during the first half of the twentieth century.

Polanyi spoke of the destruction of Europe, but America was implicated as well. Not only is our country part of the same civilization that endured between 1914 and 1945 a cataclysm that was as devastating as the wars of religion. It also participated, firebombing cities and dropping atomic bombs. The trauma was so great that after 1945 every aspect of our culture was reshaped in order to guard against the return of Hitler. (I argue this thesis in *Return of the Strong Gods*.) The postmortems not only explained what had occurred; their analyses and warnings shaped the world in which we now live, a world that seems to be careening toward a very different kind of catastrophe, one trait of which is a dangerously misguided preoccupation with fighting fascism.

Finding Truth Amid Lies

Dr. Clare Craig experienced two awakenings during the Covid years. The first was intellectual. She was a diagnostic pathologist working for the National Health Service in the UK. As did so many medical professionals in 2020, she turned her attention to the pandemic. She realized that judicious consideration of the evidence—the foundation of scientific judgment—played little role in justifying the imposition of draconian policies. She was forced to conclude that the medical establishment is corrupt. The second awakening was spiritual. She came to realize that Christianity provides trustworthy truths that even sinful men cannot corrupt.

Craig tells her story in a video produced by HART, a group of academic experts from various disciplines who are skeptical about the institutional behemoth called “the science.” She notes that in 2020 she was naive. She imagined that informed interventions in the debate about Covid policies would be welcomed. But when she pointed out the high health and social costs of lockdowns, and the detrimental effects of school closures, she was attacked and her career threatened.

The vaccine tipped her over the edge. Its release was accompanied by outright lies about its effectiveness. Widespread adoption had no noticeable effect on the spread of the virus, however beneficial it might have been for those most vulnerable. Concerns about the vaccine’s unproven safety were dismissed. Extreme measures of social coercion were employed to force people to get the jab. Most troubling was the requirement that young children receive an experimental vaccination that provided them with no benefit, given the fact that Covid poses little threat to the young.

Why were the facts ignored? Why were informed critics silenced? (They still are.) In Craig’s telling, these questions forced her to recognize that “science” is not an activity conducted by angels. Human beings “do science,” and they are as susceptible to fear, panic, cupidity, and peer pressure as anyone else. Careerism, desire for money, and lust for prestige affect scientists to the same degree as investment bankers—perhaps more so, given the way in which noble vocations can so easily be used to veil one’s base ambitions, not only from others, but more importantly from oneself.

Moreover, “the science” is an increasingly bureaucratic phenomenon. The era of the lone scientist in his lab is long past. Vast sums of government money are now necessary to sustain science as currently practiced. “Top” scientists are more likely to be effective managers and adroit academic politicians than original and independent minds. As a result, those in positions of power and prestige are the least likely to take controversial stands and risk career setbacks. Of course they went along with the lockdown catastrophe. Of course they agreed to censor dissent. Craig is embarrassed to have been taken by surprise. What ever made her so naive as to imagine that truth would win out over human sinfulness?

That question got her thinking about Christianity. She read Acts 4–5, where Peter and his colleagues preach Christ crucified and risen. The authorities in Jerusalem find their forthright speaking inconvenient. Yes, perhaps there were healings and other powerful signs that ought to be taken into consideration. But the authorities have no time for truth. Peter, John, and the others must be stopped! But the apostles are not intimidated. Even imprisonment fails to cow them. They refuse to be silent.

Craig wondered over this episode in the New Testament. What motivates us to defend ethical principles and evident truths at personal cost? Don't we need a trustworthy place to stand in order to resist the principalities and powers that rule our fallen world? Further questions pressed upon her. Was the stunning failure of scientists and medical professionals during Covid a consequence of secularism, which creates a world denuded of higher loyalties that empower us to bear witness to the truth? Has the recession of Christianity led us into a culture ruled by a dark and perverted science, as C. S. Lewis warned?

As she conveys the lessons of Covid, Craig concludes with an arresting observation. A growing minority of intelligent and reflective people are awakening to the betrayals of secular society, of which “the science” is a central pillar. Those asking questions may not agree with the details of Craig's analysis of lockdowns or vaccines. But they sense that the pandemic was not merely mishandled. Deliberate lies were told. Extreme measures of social control were employed by people who relished the opportunity to do so. Vast sums were spent to no good purpose. “The science” (along with the technocratic regime it underpins) was a god that failed. There's a new openness to the God who will not fail us.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ An American Enterprise Institute study of loneliness (“AEI Survey on Community and Society: Social Capital, Civic Health, and Quality of Life in the United States”) indicates that loneliness and political activism are strongly correlated. Here is a summary of results penned by Ryan Streeter and David Wilde:

Political volunteers [for campaigns], for example, are less embedded in the social and communal environments that produce trust and social capital. They are more than twice as likely as ordinary Americans, and three times more likely than religious Americans, to say “rarely” or “never” when asked if there are people they feel close to. They are five times more likely than religious joiners to say they rarely or never have someone they can turn to in times of need. And they are also more likely than other joiners to say their relationships are superficial.

Streeter and Wilde speculate that lonely people are attracted to the ersatz fellowship of feverish political agreement. “Lacking regular community, political joiners compensate ideologically. Eighty-seven percent report that their ideology gives them a sense of community, compared to 63 percent of ordinary Americans.”

◆ Writing for the *European Conservative* (“Why Do Bishops Cover Up Sexual Abuse?”), Joseph Shaw makes a perceptive remark about the institutional culture that gives rise to cover-ups:

In any institution the loyalty and obedience of subordinates is maintained by some kind of reward given by superiors. In commercial enterprises this is money, but money can be supplemented or replaced by many other things, including opportunities for abuse or protection against complaints. If BBC executives or Catholic bishops want to shore up their position within their organisation, protecting abusers will ensure that at least an important section of their subordinates are loyal and uncomplaining. Once a culture of abuse is established, more and more people who can be motivated in this way will be drawn into the institution, while the people not wanting to play along will be marginalised, rendered powerless, and leave.

◆ I noticed a clever ad for the YouVersion Bible App on a New York subway. “Zero stars,” the copy reads, with an image featuring five unchecked stars, followed by a comment: “Would not recommend. —Satan.” Senior editor Dan Hitchens saw the same ad in the London Tube, which he thought less clever than groan-inducing, as dad jokes so often are.

◆ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg on a writer’s fears: “I regard reviews as a kind of childhood illness to which newborn books are subject to a greater or less degree. There are instances of the soundest dying of them, while the feeble often come through. Many don’t catch them at all. Attempts have often been made to ward them off with the aid of amulets of prefaces and dedications, or even to inoculate them with self-criticisms, but this doesn’t always work.”

◆ *Jacobin* purports to revive Marxism in American politics. I don’t think it succeeds. One or another species of socialism serves as the house philosophy for most elite cultural institutions. It’s hard to be anti-system when you are a central pillar of the system. (As evidence, in 2017 the foundation that publishes *Jacobin* received a generous

grant from the über-establishment Annenberg Foundation.) Nevertheless, I enjoy paging through the quarterly issues. The artwork is superb. And I was pleased to see that the Spring 2024 number was dedicated to a theme close to my heart: religion in public life. Some content is entirely predictable: “Capitalism is itself a kind of spiritual illness.” Other material is charming in its old-fashioned conceits, such as a reference to Marxism’s “scientific understanding of history.” 1960s priests and nuns offer reassuring subject matter. Yes, Virginia, there are Christian socialists. Reza Aslan instructs readers that the notion that Jesus is God incarnate is an anachronism. After Constantine’s conversion, the doctrine was part of the Roman imperial effort to “depoliticize” Jesus, who was a political revolutionary, not a religious man. (No, wait, according to Aslan a political revolutionary is the sine qua non of true faith.) The issue includes an extensive and useful survey of religion’s influence in nations throughout the world. I cheered when a look back at the New Atheists ended with the observation that they “were bombastic and self-righteous” and “made poor instructors in the art of critical thinking.”

◆ Also writing about religion for *Jacobin*, Dustin Guastella observes that latter-day leftism may advance socialist goals in economic policy, but it tends to default to “a morally neutral egalitarianism.” According to this doctrine, everyone should have an equal opportunity to define his own values. As Guastella notes, this outlook amounts to an endorsement of liberalism’s moral minimalism: “the live-and-let-live attitude that says it’s none of my business how any particular person lives their [sic] life, as long as it doesn’t interfere with my ability to do the same.” It’s the morality suited to capitalism, Guastella argues. If socialists are to offer an alternative vision of social life, it needs to be a moral alternative:

In the coming period, socialists will again and again be forced to confront moral questions as social questions. The push for the legalization of more drugs will expand—the State of Oregon at first said yes, and then said no. Sports betting and other forms of digital gambling continue their spread. Next up is whether capitalist societies will liberalize assisted suicide—an option that will surely be taken up by the poor, the disabled, the lonely, the economically “redundant.” What do socialists say? Is it a good society that allows the consequences of its madness to be killed off “consensually”? Does it make one a good person to advocate for it?

Until and unless the left can develop a consistent moral theory of its own, Christianity will continue to have something useful to say about the biggest social questions that confront modern society. Maybe it’s worth listening.

Indeed, it is worth listening.

◆ I was chatting with an Israeli friend. We talked about the role of Judaism in Israeli society. He observed that in the aftermath of the Hamas attack, there was an upsurge in demand for tzitzit, especially among IDF soldiers. (Tzitzit are specially knotted tassels on the four corners of an undergarment worn by orthodox Jews.) The phenomenon does not necessarily suggest a religious revival. It indicates the adoption of a religious symbol as the sign of national unity. As we talked, I marveled at the reversal of fortunes. In my childhood, American society was nominally religious. Today Israeli society is nominally secular. May the trend spread.

◆ Michael Polanyi writing in 1957: “Today, if you are resolved to flout the obvious requirements of common sense and decide to plunge the world into obscurantism, you naturally invoke the justification of science.” Prescient, especially when one thinks of late March 2020.

◆ The Rainbow Reich gauleiters have not been shy about exploiting the recent uproar over IVF. In a panic, the Alabama legislature passed a law giving the IVF industry in that state almost complete immunity from tort liability. In Michigan, the governor and legislature arranged for a bill that ensures enforcement of commercial surrogacy contracts. We are well on our way to the progressive goal of babies on demand. Like abortion on demand, it advances under the flag of “reproductive freedom.”

◆ UK Member of Parliament Miriam Cates had this to say after an official report (known as the Cass Review) raised concerns about the rush to “gender-affirming” treatment for kids: “This scandal happened because too many adults put their own desire for social approval above the safety of vulnerable children.”

◆ The Cass Review brings the UK in line with Denmark and other European countries where the medical establishments have expressed reservations about transgender ideology and its undue influence over medical decisions about children. The United States remains an outlier. We are the cutting edge of the sexual revolution, and we’re determined to remain so.

◆ *UnHerd*'s editor in chief Freddie Sayers dug into the origins and activities of the Global Disinformation Index. The UK organization was founded in 2018 to stifle the “wrong” sorts of messages. It rates websites, and its ratings affect online ad placements. The goal is to starve the “bad” websites of income. The index rates left-wing ProPublica as “least dangerous,” while the *American Conservative* and *The Federalist* are among those ranked “most dangerous.” Not surprisingly, George Soros’s Open Society Foundations provided funding to get this operation going. Of greater note is the fact that money also came from the UK government, the European Union, the German Foreign Office, and an entity created and funded by the State Department. There you have it: We pay taxes so that we can be censored and silenced.

◆ NPR veteran Uri Berliner made a stir when he wrote an exposé of the government-funded radio network’s relentless left-wing bias. He gives examples: plugging the Russian collusion hoax, suppressing the Hunter Biden laptop story, insisting that it’s false to say that the Covid virus was produced in a Wuhan lab. In the BLM hysteria of 2020, NPR management required reporters to record the race, gender, and ethnicity of every person interviewed for their stories. Berliner’s survey of NPR’s national newsroom staff revealed eighty-seven registered Democrats, zero Republicans. That’s the bad news. The good news: NPR’s radio audience is dwindling, and its podcast downloads have declined. As Berliner notes, “The digital stories on our website rarely have national impact.” No surprise. At this juncture, the sole purpose of NPR is to validate the beliefs of rich white liberals in college towns.

◆ Dan Hitchens told me that my reflections about Polanyi reminded him of Ratzinger in *The Feast of Faith*:

The Marxist approach . . . is not affirmation but outrage, opposition to being because it is bad and so must be changed. Prayer is an act of being; it is affirmation, albeit not affirmation of myself as I am and of the world as it is, but affirmation of the ground of being and hence a purifying of myself and of the world from this ground upward. All purification (every via negation) is only possible on the rocklike basis of affirmation, of consent: Jesus Christ is Yes. (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19f.)

◆ A female friend expressed outrage that Caitlin Clark would be paid a piddling \$76,000 in her first year in the WNBA. (By comparison, the first pick in the 2023 NBA draft signed a four-year contract for \$55 million.) I asked her what team drafted Clark. She did not know. I asked her whether she knew the name of New York’s WNBA team. She

did not. The name of any team in the WNBA? Nope. A famous player in the WNBA? Again, no answer.

◆ The UK is presently being convulsed by efforts to suppress nicotine, not just in the form of cigarettes, but also in other methods of delivery, such as vaping. We're experiencing a similar although less advanced campaign against nicotine in the United States, in parallel with the drive toward decriminalizing marijuana. Along with potatoes, tobacco came to Europe soon after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. One would think that the anti-colonialist lobby would defend nicotine as a shining non-Western contribution to Western civilization.

◆ The National Conservatism movement (with which I am associated) scheduled a conference in Brussels in mid-April. Featured speakers included Viktor Orbán and Nigel Farage, who are invariably described by the mainstream press as "far right." Not one, but two venues were pressured to cancel the conference. After a third was secured, the left-wing regional mayor sent the police to shut it down, citing public safety. A Belgian court struck down the order that evening, and the conference was able to go on as planned. Ryszard Legutko was one of the speakers. (He's a FIRST THINGS writer, I'm proud to say.) He had this to say in *Compact* magazine:

The incident encapsulates much of what is wrong in the West today. To put it simply, no principle generally proclaimed to be sacred is really sacred. Freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, the sanctity of privacy—the rules to which the European elites unceasingly pay lip service—don't count. When it comes to fighting conservatives, the principles can be easily suspended or ignored. The European Parliament didn't react to the incident, although several of its members [Legutko among them] were among those whose freedoms had been violated. Belgium's prime minister satisfied himself with a statement of mild indignation but did nothing practical to change the situation. I heard of no protests from mainstream institutions and organizations. Needless to say, such protests would have undoubtedly exploded throughout Europe if the victims were liberals, socialists, environmentalists, LGBT activists, or other left-wing groups.

Legutko concludes with an observation about the failure of the purportedly liberal establishment to take a firm stand: "Cowards will always find an excuse for failing to act decently and hide their fear behind clumsy arguments. In a society that has increasingly busied itself with tracking down enemies, fear is on the rise, and so is cowardly behavior." The observation applies to many leaders of elite universities in the United States.

◆ Anti-fascist hysteria licenses political violence. We saw it happen in Portland, Oregon, where in 2020 left-wing radicals regularly clashed with police in front of a federal courthouse. The danger is greater still in Germany. Alternative für Deutschland politicians are regularly targeted with death threats. Some have been assaulted and hospitalized. The line often attributed to the Louisiana populist Huey Long comes to mind: “When fascism comes to America, it will be called anti-fascism.”

August/September 2024

EMPIRE UNDER SIEGE

A storm is coming. Earlier this year, I wrote about the cultural and political disruptions sure to arise from mass migration, and how they would combine with collapsing birth rates in the West, and the economic madness of the green transition (“Engines of Destruction,” January 2024). The results of the June elections for the European Parliament indicate that discontent is rising. Unfortunately, our problems are likely to worsen. The United States anchors the security of the West, and our foreign policy is in disarray.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, America pursued an ambitious program. Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs traveled to Moscow to advise the Russian government on how to manage its rapid transition to a free-market economy. American political consultants, NGOs, and intelligence operatives put their shoulders to the wheel of “democracy promotion.” These efforts may have been haphazard, even incoherent and counterproductive. But the promise was clear: The arc of history bends toward capitalism and liberal democracy. Russia, our Cold War adversary, could (and would) be brought into the aborning “rules-based international order.”

A similar promise was made about China. The World Wide Web networked the Middle Kingdom into the global village. Hollywood exported movies. Chinese students flooded American universities. In 2001, China was invited into the World Trade Organization. Yet another adversary would embrace our way of life, we were told. It might take time, but a prospering China integrated into the “rules-based international order” was thought to be a sure thing.

These promises were bipartisan. In his second inaugural address, George W. Bush insisted that freedom was for the whole world. Barack Obama struck a different but closely related note in his second inaugural address, when he solemnly announced that the world envied our diversity. The rhetoric of America’s benevolent triumph was nearly universal. America was not building an empire. We were inviting the entire world to receive the glorious inheritance of all mankind (which came to include tutorials on why we’re not to use words like “mankind”). America was but a custodian of this inheritance, the argument went, not an aggressive power.

The plausibility of this dream of global prosperity and cultural progress has been collapsing for quite some time. Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea in 2014. Secretary of State John Kerry denounced the Russian military action as “an incredible act of aggression” and harrumphed, “You just don’t in the twenty-first century behave in a

nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on [a] completely trumped-up pretext.” History (of which, again, America is but the custodian) will not countenance such actions!

The year 2022 saw another Russian outrage, a failed blitzkrieg in Ukraine that has turned into a grinding war on the borders of Europe. Moscow seems poised to digest the eastern provinces of that unfortunate country. On October 7, 2023, an Iranian proxy slaughtered more than one thousand Israelis. Another proxy fired missiles into northern Israel. Yet another proxy shut down the Suez Canal. Meanwhile, China has continued to militarize the South China Sea.

I don’t wish to detail the international situation, only to highlight the obvious. After the Cold War ended, the United States invested ideological, economic, and military resources in a grand project of global unity. The enterprise was not undertaken naively. Planners knew that there would be tensions. Nations might compete. We would need to face down bad actors like Saddam Hussein. But the ambitions were grand—and the pursuit of them was embraced by very nearly our entire establishment, right, left, and center. Human rights would undergird a worldwide consensus. International institutions would mature into effective instruments of economic, technical, and legal coordination. Open trade would bring prosperity to everyone. And the whole system would be backstopped by American military power, at no great expense and without domestic backlash.

You need not follow the news closely to recognize that this project has failed. After Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration imposed “super sanctions,” promising that such measures would bring the Russian economy to its knees. These measures, and the confidence with which they were imposed, reflected the old consensus, which presupposed the end-of-history dream world. But the outcomes contradict that fantasy. Countries commanding nearly half of global GDP refused to join our sanctions regime, exposing the obvious fact that the “rules-based international order” is not international and never has been. It has always been an instrument of American power.

I’m reluctant to use the word “empire.” After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States did not establish colonies. But the term has become unavoidable. The international order was made in our image, an ersatz empire, as recent events have revealed. Faced with the prospect of Russian aggression, the demilitarized nations of Europe are forced to operate as American vassal states. When it comes to independent foreign policy, is Germany all that different from Belarus? The same question can be posed about the State of Israel, as well as Japan, Australia, and other nations in the deepening shadow of China’s military buildup.

The rise of a coalition of nations opposed to U.S. global leadership poses difficult challenges. But I fear those challenges will become crises. And they will do so because of the persistence of self-serving illusions.

This late June morning, as I write, a *Wall Street Journal* article details the ways in which China, Iran, and North Korea have buttressed Russia's military and economic power. The *Journal* reports, "The speed and depth of expanding security ties involving the U.S. adversaries has at times surprised American intelligence analysts." Surprised? Are our "experts" so cocooned in post-Cold War confidence that they fail to recognize the widespread resentment of America's presumption to run the world? I fear the question answers itself.

I'm not a foreign policy expert, but I venture to guess that the combined military firepower of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran (and its proxies) is substantial, perhaps equal to any force that the United States and its allies can bring to bear on short notice. How is it that we have allowed such a coalition to emerge? The *Journal* reports this expert opinion: "Russia and the other nations have set aside historic frictions to collectively counter what they regard as a U.S.-dominated global system." I marvel at the formulation, "what they regard." In effect, our policymakers suggest that the Russia-China-Iran-North Korea alliance rests on a misconception. Putin and Xi need to wake up to the truth. The "global system" is not U.S. dominated but U.S. sponsored—for the sake of world peace, prosperity, and the triumph of abortion and gay rights . . . er, human rights. It is nothing so narrow and parochial as the imposition of America's national interests or our activist ideologies.

Maybe the Great and the Good in Washington recognize reality, and they mouth the old pieties out of habit; or perhaps they sense (accurately) the political danger of being the first to break with established orthodoxies. Can you imagine the domestic furor that would be visited upon a Secretary of State who suggested (again, accurately) that a foreign policy promoting gay rights and other progressive causes is a virtue-signaling luxury we can't afford in an era of great-power competition? But I worry that we are led by true believers. Some imagine that the United States has been ordained by God to defend "democracy." Others think that we have a secular mission to promote "reproductive freedom" and LGBTQ rights around the world (the arc of history, and so on). Others are technocratic worker bees, animated by the falsely modest ambition to be evenhanded administrators of a rules-based international system—if only the "revisionist" powers would stop undermining it.

I am not a hard-hearted "realist." I harbor the hope that the United States can be a force for good in the world. But we are living in the ruins of the failed utopian project

undertaken after the end of the Cold War. It was gestated by the hubris of men and women who imagined that the United States, the country that uniquely combined vast wealth with a twentieth-century tradition of militarism, possessed a nearly unlimited power to shape world events. Recent years have shown the limits of our power. I expect harsher lessons before the decade ends. America won't be a force for much of anything, good or bad, unless our leaders master their hubris. Only if they do so, and get on with the grim task of determining what can be saved and what must be sacrificed, will we be able to maintain our republic, ensure our prosperity, and sustain our freedom of action so that the next generation may dream new—and one hopes less utopian—dreams.

Pride Month

I did a good bit of traveling in early June. Only in mid-month did I settle back into my regular routines, walking to work through midtown Manhattan with my miniature dachshund, Mabel. As I traversed the avenues, I noticed a striking fact: Pride flags are conspicuously absent. Yes, a large Pride flag flutters in front of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church on Park Avenue. There's a clutch of them at Rockefeller Center, and small flags hang in the windows of a few businesses here and there. But compared to recent years, the city manifests few outward signs that Pride Month is in full swing.

What accounts for the disappearance of the banner of the Rainbow Reich? Matthew Schmitz offers his answer in this issue ("The Fall of Pride"). I have some thoughts as well.

A simple answer is success. We're talking about New York City, and perhaps the rainbow gauleiters have taken yes for an answer. LGBTQ and the rest of the alphabet soup is so thoroughly established that it's easy to take the rainbow agenda for granted and just get on with life. I can imagine an exchange in the West Village. "Hey, you going to the Pride Parade this weekend?" "Oh, jeez, forgot it was Pride Month. Can't join you. I've already made plans for a session at Soul Cycle that afternoon."

The take-it-for-granted reality of gay rights suggests another explanation. The Rainbow Reich is today's dominant cultural regime. Those of us who dissent must do so delicately. Anyone who talks like Pope Francis ("frocìaggine") is immediately censured, not just by progressives, but by conservatives as well. By contrast, the *New Yorker* can publish trans writers who swing rhetorical machetes, and in so doing win applause. And there's the rub. We're living in a time of record distrust of institutions—and the rainbow agenda has become the house ideology for very nearly all of them, from universities and museums to Fortune 500 companies, the NFL, and the organization formerly known as the Boy Scouts.

One hundred thousand people die from drug overdoses each year. Mentally ill vagrants sleep in the streets. Migrant tent cities occupy public soccer fields. Young people report mental health problems at record levels. At drug stores, deodorant and toothpaste are under lock and key. People are smart enough to know that they were lied to during the pandemic. Perhaps none of this has anything to do with gay rights and trans activism. But causality does not matter. When your ideology is the regime's ideology, it is implicated in the regime's failures.

Put simply, maybe Pride flags have ceased to festoon Manhattan's buildings for the same reason Joe Biden suffers from low job approval: People don't think things are working well, and they blame the rainbow-waving powers that be.

Perhaps there is still another reason. As Schmitz notes, in 2018, the wedge of black, brown, and other colors was added to the original rainbow design of the Pride flag. This was done to effect symbolic "intersectionality," the unification of various progressive enterprises that seek the liberation of the marginalized. After October 7, 2023, pro-Hamas protests erupted at many universities. Although they waved the Palestinian flag, not the Pride flag, the hardcore supporters of Hamas were joined by students and outside activists devoted to defeating the patriarchy, calling out white privilege, and other progressive causes. It became clear that the Pride flag was the anti-Israel flag, the flag of those who denounce "settler colonialism." As a consequence, the rainbow symbol has lost its feel-good, "affirming" character. It's a battle flag now, and quite a few people, including some who thought of themselves as on the left, are realizing that it's the flag of destructive, barbaric, anti-civilizational forces, which must be opposed.

We're living in a time of change. Above, I note the rapid transformation of the international scene. Very different but equally dramatic changes are underway in American society. A recent poll by the French marketing firm Ipsos shows a slight decline in support for gay marriage among Americans. Fifty-one percent of respondents believe that gay couples should be able to marry, down 8 points from the peak of support in 2021. The decline is astounding. Since the 2015 *Obergefell* decision, we have been bombarded by LGBTQ propaganda. The Rainbow Reich has captured the media and our educational institutions. Yet support for gay marriage is declining?

Gay marriage is only one aspect of the cultural revolution that has transformed our lives over the last two generations. Widespread divorce affects far more people, as do the torrent of pornography and the deterioration of male-female relations. Yet gay marriage is an important symbol. It promised to stabilize the liberationist ethos of Stonewall by uniting it with the normative institution of marriage. (This view was promoted by Andrew Sullivan and many others.) In effect, gay marriage promised a cessation of hostilities. Progressivism would no longer attack the basic patterns of traditional life, as those patterns generously opened themselves to those formerly marginalized.

I never believed that promise. Transgender ideology follows directly in the train of gay marriage, which is why progressive activists have found it irresistible. If we can redefine marriage, the most fundamental and primordial form of human relations for all cultures, then we can redefine what it means to be a man or woman. After *Obergefell*, a child can have two fathers, or three. It's no great leap from that fantasy to the transgender dogma that a father can become a mother. Perhaps the American public is waking up and realizing that it was sold a false bill of goods. Far from establishing a stable basis for "inclusion," the Supreme Court's redefinition of marriage signaled the license to redefine absolutely anything and everything.

The Rainbow Reich is an ugly, dysfunctional place in which to grow up. In absolute terms, the Zoomers are the generation most loyal to the Rainbow Reich. But as Schmitz documents, support is falling faster among Zoomers than among any other generation. In 2021, Gen Z support for gay marriage ran at 80 percent. In 2023 it dropped to 69 percent. Results shows a similarly sharp reduction in support for transgender ideology. The sexual revolution's grandchildren are beginning to revolt against the revolutionaries. We'll know we're on the brink of a cultural Thermidor when a group of Yale students gathers on Old Campus to burn the Pride flag.

Forceful Words

On May 11, Harrison Butker gave a commencement speech at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. The Kansas City Chiefs' star kicker understands our present situation. We live in a society dominated by a post-Christian elite that ignores the principles of natural law and is hostile to the teachings of the Catholic Church. He offered the graduating seniors sound advice (for the most part), and his words were unvarnished by the usual softening pieties about diversity and inclusion.

Seemingly channeling Pope Francis, who often slams priests, Butker criticized clergy for failing to live their vocations. I must demur. I'm more often inspired than discouraged by the priests and bishops I meet. Butker chastised the leadership of the Catholic Church for its widespread and sometimes eager conformity to the COVID lockdowns. Here I agree. He told the students, "We cannot buy into the lie that the things we experienced during COVID were appropriate." Amen. He also commended the traditional Latin Mass, noting that a young person who goes to the Latin Mass is likely to find a community that will support his efforts to live the fullness of the Catholic faith—a true statement, although my own parish is not TLM and provides exactly that kind of support.

For the most part, though, commentators ignored these provocations. They focused on Butker's remarks to the female graduates. In so many words, he told them that they have been told "diabolical lies" about what will bring happiness and fulfillment in their

lives. Rather than harkening to the secular world's claim that they should covet careers, promotions, titles, and awards, the women graduating should recognize that the most important vocation for most of them will be as mothers and wives.

One organization objected that talk of mothers and wives advances "harmful stereotypes that threaten social progress." Another lamented, "Butker reinforced toxic stereotypes about men, power and control." And so on, and so on. Women of the world unite! A tall, bearded football player is scheming to keep you barefoot and pregnant!

Butker introduced his remarks about marriage and motherhood with a general observation: "Each of you [men and women] has the potential to leave a legacy that transcends yourselves." Few of us are Nobel Prize winners, famous writers, or even respected community leaders. For the overwhelming majority, sustaining a marriage and having children, nurturing them, providing for them, and launching them into adulthood constitutes the most profound enterprise of self-transcendence. Marriage and children draw us out of our me-centered existence. It requires us to serve rather than be served.

One might object that this truth holds for husbands and fathers, not just wives and mothers. Quite true. However, Butker reads the signs of the times correctly. Yes, young men are messed up in many ways: basement-dwelling, video-gaming man-children. But when it comes to family life, the progressive propaganda is directed toward women (and often against men). Women are told that career success matters more than marriage and children.

Is it "harmful" and "toxic" to counter the "female empowerment" rhetoric with frank, unnuanced statements about the supreme vocation of motherhood? I don't think so. In truth, Butker is sounding a fair warning to women who believe the lies, and there are many women who need to hear it. Women in the United States are not being socialized into traditional female roles. They are not getting married, and they are not having children. One study shows that nearly 20 percent of women in America aged 40 to 44 are childless. Rates of infertility rise along with professional success. Among high-achieving women in that age cohort (those earning \$100,000 or more per year), close to 50 percent do not have children. This is not a formula for happiness. Butker was right to speak bluntly.

Not everything Butker said hits the mark. (He made a strange remark about federal legislation that criminalizes saying "who killed Jesus.") But on the whole the speech was a welcome broadside. As Flannery O'Connor observed, when society is in the grip of false and distorting ideologies, "you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the

hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.” I’m grateful to Harrison Butker for following her advice.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ Henri de Lubac writing in *Paradoxes of Faith*: “When the ecclesiastical world is worldly, it is only [a] caricature of the world. It is the world, not only in greater mediocrity, but even in greater ugliness.”

◆ De Lubac, from the same source: “There is nothing more demanding than the taste for mediocrity. Beneath its ever-moderate appearance, there is nothing more intemperate; nothing surer in its instinct; nothing more pitiless in its refusals. It suffers no greatness, shows beauty no mercy.”

◆ Douglas Farrow writing in his Substack newsletter, “Desiring a Better Country”:

It is sound doctrine, even sound political doctrine, to say that none but the virtuous are good and that none but the good are free. The vicious may know and enjoy a form of freedom, derived from the works of the virtuous, but they remain bound by their own vices, as if their feet were in the stocks. Their politics, and perchance their religion, represent vain attempts to liberate themselves.

Thus the paradox of a free society (a happy paradox, not a debilitating one): It must shepherd its members toward virtue in order to sustain a culture of freedom, and at times the shepherd must thwack the recalcitrant with his crook.

◆ The mainstream press is catching up with reality. In early May, Tim Sullivan penned a report for the Associated Press on the rising tide of conservative Catholicism. Guitar masses are out; Palestrina and Gregorian chant are in. Women are wearing head coverings. Priests are preaching about sin and redemption. There’s more Latin and more incense. By Sullivan’s reckoning, the changes, though by no means universal, are significant. Mass attendance is down. Today, many from Catholic backgrounds do not bother to have their children baptized. Against this larger trend of decline, those who remain engaged grow in importance and influence. A Georgetown University research center reports that only 9 percent of nominally Catholic millennials attend Mass at least once a week. It goes without saying that this small group, many of whom have large

families and adhere to doctrinal norms, will shape the future of the Church—and that future won't be to the liking of guitar-strumming Baby Boomer Jesuits. More often than not, the young people in the pews are the “backward-looking” and “rigid” types whom Pope Francis censures. Sullivan cites a study of theological and political attitudes held by priests. It shows marked differences between the older, now retiring clergy, who tend to be liberal, and younger men at the outset of their vocations, who hold conservative views. As one priest told Sullivan, the young priests “say they're trying to restore what us old guys ruined.” Another older cleric was more direct: “They're just waiting for us to die.” I urge fraternal solidarity, not enmity, not just among priests, but among all Catholics. But the impulse toward restoration is sound. As C. S. Lewis observed, when you've gone a long way in the wrong direction, to get back on course, the first thing to do is turn around and go back the way you came.

◆ Marijuana has surpassed alcohol as America's favorite addiction. In 1992, fewer than one million Americans were daily smokers of pot. In 2022, the number had soared to 17.7 million. In the same year, 14.7 million Americans reported drinking alcohol daily. Writing for *UnHerd*, Mary Harrington speculates that the ascendancy of marijuana bespeaks a cultural change. In Anglo-American culture, coffee, cigarettes, and afterwork booze were part of a culture of work. Factory workers chugged Budweiser at the corner bar when their shifts ended. Corporate managers poured martinis at home after a long commute. By contrast, here in New York, I often smell pot as I walk to work in the morning. It's not the aroma of productivity.

◆ The political scientist Ryan Burge keeps his eye on data about American religious trends in his Substack newsletter, “Graphs About Religion.” He notes that a 2023 Pew National Public Opinion Reference Survey reports a small decline in “nones” (those who say that they have no religious affiliation). This trend includes younger people. Burge plots data showing that among people born after 1980, there has been no growth in nones since 2020. He speculates that we're experiencing “the end of an era in American religious demography.” His assessment: “The rise of the nones may be largely over now.”

◆ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “The meaning of life lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but in the development of the soul.”

◆ On his LinkedIn page, Piero Tozzi, staff director of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, posted a call for Google and YouTube to restore a Hong Kong protest song that the tech giants had taken down at the request of the Chinese Communist Party. He notes that the ready compliance with the CCP's dictates runs counter to the corporations' stated commitments to human rights. Below the posting, the AI function recommends reading about the role of human rights in corporate activities. Click through and you get instruction about how diligently Google and YouTube adhere to human rights in their corporate decision. I suppose AI stands for "artificial indoctrination."

◆ Reflecting in the *European Conservative* on the present fixation on racial identity in film and on the stage, Anthony Daniels makes a trenchant observation:

The obsession with social justice (a moving target if ever there was one)—of which the absurdities and contradictions of theatre casting outlined above are but a minor example—is inconsistent, hypocritical, absurd, boring, literal-minded, unsophisticated, divisive, intellectually nugatory, humourless, trivial, and narcissistic, as well as power-mad. It destroys everything it touches, including the stage.

◆ In 2023 Christopher Rufo exposed the fact that Texas Children's Hospital was maiming minors in the service of transgender ideology. The Texas Legislature passed a bill prohibiting transgender medical procedures for minors. Now Rufo reports that the Texas Children's Hospital has persisted in practicing "gender-affirming care," committing Medicaid fraud in order to fund the prohibited procedures ("The Murky Business of Transgender Medicine," *City Journal*). Federal officials have not stood idle. As the controversy became public in 2023, they were "busy assembling information." The target? The whistleblowers! "A federal prosecutor, Tina Ansari, threatened the original whistleblower [Eithan] Haim with prosecution." Then, in early June, "the stakes intensified. Three heavily armed federal agents knocked on Haim's door and gave him a summons. According to the documents, he had been indicted on four felony counts of violating medical privacy laws. If convicted, Haim faces the possibility of ten years in federal prison." A sadly familiar story. The rule of law turned into an ideological weapon.

◆ Gen Z writer Freya India writing in her Substack newsletter, "GIRLS":

It's hard to put this into words but I think, in some ways, what we actually want is to be humbled. People say Gen Z follow these new faiths [namely social justice, climate activism, and other urgent progressive causes] because we crave belonging and connection, but what if we also crave commandments? What if we are desperate to be delivered from something? To be at the mercy of something? I think we underestimate how hard it is for young people today to feel their way through life without moral guardrails and guidance, to follow the whims and wishes of our ego and be affirmed by adults every step of the way. I'm not sure that's actual freedom. And if it is, I'm not sure freedom is what any of us actually wants.

October 2024

FELLOW TRAVELERS

Christianity is cropping up in unexpected places. This summer, Jordan Peterson chatted with Elon Musk. In his inimitable way, Peterson digressed into the long-dead religions of Mesopotamia, tying ancient wisdom to brain science. Musk responded with thoughtful comments about the meaning of life. The conversation was edifying, a nice change from the usual fare.

Then Peterson, who was wearing a loud dinner jacket featuring images of the Madonna and Child, took up the question of forgiveness and turning the other cheek. Musk confessed, “While I’m not particularly religious, I do believe that the teachings of Jesus are good and wise.” He allowed that he is best described as “a cultural Christian,” and he observed that Christian beliefs have done a great deal of good in the world. “I’m actually a big believer in the principles of Christianity. I think they’re very good.”

Musk was not confessing faith in Christ. Earlier in the interview, he had outlined his belief in what he calls “the religion of curiosity” or “the religion of enlightenment,” which involves asking the right questions about life. Nonetheless, Musk was staking out cultural territory for faith, expressing appreciation for the role and influence of Christianity.

Something similar had happened in the spring. While being interviewed, the famous atheist Richard Dawkins expressed his regret over Christianity’s diminished influence in British society. Like Musk, he stated that he is not a believer. He was quick to call fundamentalist Christianity pernicious nonsense and tangled with his interviewer over the credibility of Christian belief. In spite of that, he called himself a cultural Christian, and in the face of the rising influence of Islam he was keen to place himself on “Team Christian.”

It’s easy to make too much of passing comments like these. But we should not make too little of them either. Aaron Renn has observed that Christians in the United States now live in a “negative world.” In elite circles, a consensus holds that Christianity is largely a force for evil. Some see it as instilling a dangerous fanaticism, an eagerness to impose dogmas on others. Others fix on sexual morality and regard Christianity as the source of homophobia and other repressive pathologies.

Under present circumstances, therefore, it is notable when prominent and powerful figures say positive things about Christianity. What gives? Are we witnessing a revival of sorts, a cultural resurgence of Christian prestige? Yes and no—or, rather, no and yes.

The negative world that Renn documents is not abating. By some measures, it is intensifying. The *New York Times* and other organs of the liberal establishment eagerly stoke hysteria about “white Christian nationalism.” A coven of Bible-thumping racists is poised to take over the country! With astounding alacrity, the mainstream media turned JD Vance into a strange, alien, and vaguely threatening figure. His recent conversion to Catholicism was treated as a sign that the blue-eyed, bearded man from Ohio is “weird.”

There’s another dynamic at work, however, one that may be motivating the surge in pro-Christian statements. We live in a polarized country, which means that two sides are consolidating, opposing each other as solid blocks. In this political environment, progressives fix on Christianity as the emblem of all that is harmful to their dreams of a transformed America. As a consequence, those who dissent from progressive political and cultural dogmas, and are increasingly outspoken in their opposition, readily see themselves as members of “Team Christian.”

The full interview with Richard Dawkins makes clear that he is troubled by the consequences of Britain’s hectoring multicultural ideology. The interview took place on Easter weekend, and Dawkins was dismayed that government officials were encouraging the populace to celebrate Ramadan, not the Christian holiday. Had the multicultural commissars been less brazen, were the reigning ideology less aggressive, I doubt Dawkins would have expressed any sympathy for Christianity. He would have remained stuck in the anti-religious ruts of his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*. Dawkins and Alan Sokal recently penned an op-ed criticizing the politically correct conceit that sex is “assigned at birth” rather than established at conception (the obvious scientific truth). Here as well, his staunch opposition to faith notwithstanding, the realities of the political scene put him and his opposition to transgender ideology on “Team Christian.”

Jordan Peterson and Elon Musk are notorious for their violations of progressive rules and regulations about what can be said or thought. This does not make them believers in Christ as the Risen Lord but puts them on the same side as Christians who are deemed “deplorables,” often for the same reasons. Put simply, as Christianity is targeted by progressives, its cultural intransigence becomes a rallying point for those who oppose progressivism, even as they reject Christianity’s theological precepts.

Last year, Ayaan Hirsi Ali explained why she had converted to Christianity. She framed her turn to faith in terms of a “civilizational war,” one element of which rests in the necessity of resisting woke ideology, “which is eating into the moral fibre of the next generation.” The tools of science and liberal principles are insufficient to meet the

challenge. She observes that if we are to renew a culture of freedom, we must return to the deepest roots of the West, the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Ali recognizes that faith is not a cultural-political position in a civilizational struggle. It's a personal turn toward God, a giving of oneself to the Lord. I'll wager, however, that her journey to faith began as a cultural commitment and matured into a theological one. This pathway is and will be traveled by others. I can well imagine a college student falling in with Christian peers, saying, "I'm not a believer, but with them I'm free to speak my mind." That's not a declaration of faith, but it points in the right direction.

It's common to note that many come to church for community, or because they seek the beauty found in the music and liturgy. As Samira Kawash observes in this issue ("The Campus Ministry Boom"), these natural goods often draw us to the supernatural good of God himself. The same holds for a healthy culture, a coherent moral framework, and the freedom to use one's reason.

I had in mind Christianity's rising prestige among rebels against woke tyranny when I composed the concluding paragraphs of a review of two recent volumes on today's negative world (Renn's *Life in the Negative World* and John Daniel Davidson's *Pagan America*) for the *Claremont Review of Books*:

In the negative world, Christianity is not part of the dominant regime. This imposes burdens. The outsider does not get preferment, and he's sometimes persecuted. . . . But we are living in a time when populism is on the rise. The insiders are under assault. And people know that the architects of the present, shitty regime, and the enforcers of its increasingly insane dogmas, are not evangelical pastors or Catholic bishops.

In 2016, a large body of alienated, angry Americans noticed that a brash, boastful New York developer attracted the ire of the Great and the Good. The more he was denounced, the more they loved him. Perhaps something similar will happen in the spiritual realm. The more hostile the people who brought us Drag Queen Story Hour are toward Christianity, the more obvious it will be that the churches are an alternative to our failing regime. Will people who are sick and tired of the Rainbow Reich begin to say, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend"?

It's a hard time to be a pastor or priest. But it's a good time. Dissent is growing. Few young people trust educational institutions, and for good reason. They're aware that they have grown up in a cesspool of pornography,

have been poisoned by social media, and were sacrificed on the altar of COVID lockdowns. Some, maybe more than a few, will turn to Christ as an anchor in the dissolving, disintegrating culture of the post-Christian West. When a house is collapsing, it's a great advantage to be on the outside.

May the tribe of cultural Christians grow.

Solidarity and Freedom

I recently re-read *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Penned by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the aftermath of World War II, the book is a marvelous combination of astute social analysis and political polemic. Schlesinger was very nearly the perfect embodiment of an established postwar figure: the partisan intellectual. I don't disparage that role, for obvious reasons.

Born in 1917, Schlesinger came of age during FDR's long tenure in the White House. The New Deal transformed the economic foundations of America, putting liberalism in the driver's seat and giving it "a positive and confident ring." The same liberal regime oversaw the American triumph in World War II. As he was writing in the late 1940s, on the crest of the American Century, Schlesinger could announce that liberalism stood "for responsibility and for achievement."

The theme of a grown-up and "virile" liberalism runs throughout *The Vital Center*. Schlesinger's main adversary is, by implication, the immature and naive progressive, whom he calls a "doughface" liberal. Show trials and campaigns of extermination had shown the Soviet Union to be an inhumane totalitarian regime, and the rise of fascism demonstrated modern man's vulnerability to demagogues. "My generation," Schlesinger observes, was reminded "rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world."

These two experiences—the positive achievements of New Deal liberalism and the looming peril of totalitarianism—shape the "vital center" that Schlesinger details through the 250 pages of his book. On the one hand, postwar liberals retained confidence in the capacity of social and economic experts. They proposed and implemented policies that aimed to improve the material and moral conditions of society. On the other hand, tutored by the horrors of tyrannical utopianism, the postwar liberals recognized that the essential task of our time is to defend "the ultimate integrity of the individual." Social planning then and now must always be subject to a crucial test: Does it protect and promote freedom?

As the twentieth century was ending, Zygmunt Bauman coined the term "liquid modernity." The basic insight had been formulated one hundred years earlier. In 1897,

Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern sociology, published *Suicide*. He correlated the rise of suicide with the rapid industrialization and urbanization of society. The modernizing process had severely disrupted the thick, stable realities of agrarian life. Durkheim speculated that, deprived of strong norms and cast into an anonymous, rapidly changing commercial society, individuals became disoriented and distressed, a condition that tempted them to self-harm.

The analysis was deepened and extended by many social theorists in the early twentieth century. Schlesinger adapts it to explain totalitarianism. Industrialization and other modern trends have produced great benefits, he writes, but “at the expense of the protective tissue which had bound together feudal society.” The whirling wheel of technological change disorients. “Our modern industrial economy, based on impersonality, interchangeability and speed, has worn away the old protective securities without creating new ones.”

When individuals are deprived of a warm sense of belonging, freedom becomes a burden. “Man longs to escape the pressures beating down on his frail individuality; and more and more, the surest means of escape seems to be to surrender that individuality to some massive, external authority.” Thus the appeal of totalitarianism: “Against the loneliness and rootlessness of man in free society, it promises the security and comradeship of crusading unity.”

As John Owen explained in the last issue (“Liberalism’s Fourth Turning”), the leitmotif of the liberal tradition is freedom. What poses the greatest threat to liberty? How is freedom best promoted and protected? In Schlesinger’s telling, the anomie and atomization brought by modern technological change provide fertile ground for totalitarianism. The defenders of freedom must address this danger with economic management in order to moderate the dynamism of a capitalist economy. “We must somehow give the lonely masses a sense of individual human function, we must restore community to the industrial order.”

Schlesinger was aware of the paradox imposed upon his generation. There needed to be technocratic management to ensure social solidarity, but not so much as to usurp individual responsibility and smother individual freedom. Here’s one of his sweeping formulations: “We require individualism which does not wall man off from community; we require community which sustains but does not suffocate the individual.” He urges a defense of freedom that has the “virile” (he uses this term repeatedly) courage to take up the challenge of governing and guiding society in perilous times. There can be no set formula for attaining this goal. It requires a Goldilocks balance, enough technocratic management, but not too much—a “vital center.”

I admire Schlesinger and his cohort of postwar liberals. They were right about the unsettled condition of Western societies in the mid-twentieth century, which made them vulnerable to utopian politics of the left and right. They were correct to counsel against formulaic political programs. Politics is an art. We must identify the besetting diseases afflicting the body politic, which we can at best remediate and balance. The fall of man blocks any fantasy of a cure.

In *Return of the Strong Gods*, I argue that the vital center outlined by Schlesinger was unstable because it tilted in the direction of openness and deconsolidation. The postwar liberals recognized that we needed solidarity—trustworthy anchors in a modern world of accelerating change. But their anti-totalitarian consensus took a great deal for granted.

Schlesinger had the luxury of writing at a time when American society was swinging in a culturally conservative direction. Men returning from war married. There was a baby boom. Churches filled. New York governor Nelson Rockefeller's political career was torpedoed when he divorced his wife in 1962.

Historians underestimate the signal importance of the strong moral consensus of those decades. The French speak of the three decades after World War II as the *trente glorieuses*, the “thirty glorious” years. Americans are less effusive. Race riots and Vietnam marred the 1960s. Nevertheless, those decades increasingly evoke nostalgia. It was a time of historically low income inequality. Politics was not rancorously partisan. A man working in a factory could buy a modest suburban home, support a family, and take an annual vacation to Atlantic City. Civic institutions were strong.

American stability, prosperity, and happiness during those years rested as much on cultural foundations as economic ones—perhaps more so. Those foundations have been eroded. Wave after wave of “liberation” has disintegrated the postwar middle-class consensus. That consensus has been derided as racist, patriarchal, homophobic, and xenophobic. As a consequence, the great majority of Americans are deprived of a solid, stable, and home-building moral and social consensus. Today, marriage is in tatters. Homes are broken. Our political culture is riven by bitter polarization. Our institutions are distrusted.

In the face of this disintegration, a new totalitarian temptation has emerged. It is not communist or fascist. Rather, it manifests in technocratic means of social control. Matthew Crawford recently reported on the British government's schemes to blunt and suppress public hostility to mass migration. Jacob Siegel has documented the ways in which American elites and government officials have transformed the instruments used to prosecute the post-9/11 war on terror into a multifaceted domestic security state. The

Covid lockdowns revealed that the people who are running things in the West have a strong appetite for social control.

It's easy to become paranoid. I try to resist. But we must not be naive. In this tumultuous decade, we need someone like Arthur Schlesinger Jr., someone with the intelligence and imagination to explain to American elites that the cultural revolutions of recent decades have atomized our society, undermined solidarity, and disoriented the majority of Americans. We need a new vital center, a politics of moral and cultural reconsolidation that has the same courage to denounce the Human Rights Campaign that Schlesinger had in condemning the "doughface" liberals.

Don't Constitutionalize the Rainbow Reich

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court of Texas handed down a decision (*Texas v. Loe*) upholding that state's law prohibiting medically irreversible and damaging transgender treatments for minors. The Court held that, in passing the statute, the Texas legislature employed its constitutionally legitimate power to promote the health and welfare of the state's citizens. The law does not infringe upon the rights of parents to determine the medical care of their children or the rights of doctors to provide care.

Justice Jimmy Blacklock wrote a concurring opinion that laid out the issues at stake with exemplary clarity. He observed that the case turned on fundamental and mutually exclusive assumptions about what it means to be human.

Within the Traditional Vision, human males and females do not "identify" as men and women. We are men and women, irreducibly and inescapably, no matter how we feel. Proceeding from these moral and philosophical premises, the Traditional Vision naturally holds that medicinal or surgical interference with a child's developing capacity for normal, healthy sexual reproduction is manifestly harmful to the child, an obvious injustice unworthy of the high label "medicine."

Against this view, Blacklock ranges the alternative—"call it the Transgender Vision." This view "holds that we all have a 'sex assigned at birth,'" and thus assigned, it "may or may not correspond to our inwardly felt or outwardly expressed 'gender identity.'" Under these assumptions, "the Transgender Vision holds that an adolescent child who feels out of place in a biologically normal body should in many cases take puberty-blocking drugs designed to retard or prevent the emergence of sexual characteristics out of line with the child's gender identity." It manifestly follows that parents and children have a right to this kind of treatment, just as they have a right to other medical procedures that promote well-being.

The Traditional and Transgender Visions “diverge at the most basic level.” The disagreement is metaphysical, as it were. Judges need to recognize that debates over medical procedures and disputes about empirical claims concerning the efficacy of transgender treatments “are merely the surface-level consequences of deep disagreement over the deepest questions about who we are.” The Traditional Vision sees the treatments as “self-evidently harmful to children,” whereas the Transgender Vision regards the same treatments as “necessary medical care.”

The constitutional question amounts to this: Does the Texas Legislature have the proper constitutional authority to legislate in accord with the Traditional Vision? Or does the Transgender Vision enjoy a special, privileged constitutional status, which the court must honor? Blacklock observes that it would be very strange for a judge to answer “no” and “yes.” How could anyone reasonably hold that the Traditional Vision, which has held sway from time immemorial, can’t serve as a rational basis for determining what accords with the health and welfare of citizens? And on what basis can a judge determine that the Transgender Vision enjoys privileged status, given the fact that it has never “obtained the consent of the People of Texas”?

A great deal of testimony in this case came from medical experts, who insisted that interventions to facilitate “transitioning” enjoy the approval of medical associations and other professional bodies. Blacklock notes that such testimony is irrelevant. “The Texas Constitution authorizes the Legislature to regulate ‘practitioners of medicine.’ It does not authorize practitioners of medicine to regulate the Legislature—no matter how many expert witnesses they bring to bear.” Quite right. Doctors and researchers are free to adopt metaphysical assumptions. But so are legislators. And when those assumptions conflict, those of elected legislators determine the law, not those of “experts.”

Blacklock gets to the nub of our debates about transgender ideology (and pinpoints the specious reasoning of the Supreme Court’s *Bostock* decision): Those urging transgender rights “claim that the Transgender Vision is an established matter of science, not a matter of belief.” But saying it does not make it so. “From the perspective of the Traditional Vision”—I would say, from the perspective of any clear-thinking person—“any such assertion is an inherent conflation of speculative philosophy and empirical science. Neither a philosophical proposition (‘gender identity is real’) nor a moral rule (‘gender identity should be affirmed’) can be proven with scientific method or the tools of medicine.”

Medical associations, academic journals, and universities have become captive to progressive ideologies, transgender ideology among them. They are certainly not trustworthy sources of moral wisdom. And they are increasingly untrustworthy sources of empirical truths. Kudos to Justice Blackwood for so clearly explaining why their

distorted moral presumptions and perverted science should not be accorded transcendent legal authority.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ In this issue, we published the winner of the first annual FIRST THINGS poetry prize, “Two Owls” by Josiah A. R. Cox. Second place went to Ryan Wilson for his sonnet “Gather Ye,” also published in this issue. Congratulations to both poets. Our founder, Richard John Neuhaus, recognized the significance of literary art. The politics of politics is an important affair, to be sure. But we can only vote for what we can imagine, which means that any publication with political interests (and FIRST THINGS certainly has such commitments) worth its salt must leaven and refine our imaginations. Many thanks to the Tim & Judy Rudderow Foundation for its generous support in establishing this new prize.

◆ Henri de Lubac (*Paradoxes of Faith*): “When the world makes its way into the Church itself, it is worse than just being the world. Of the world it has neither the greatness in its illusory glamor nor that sort of loyalty it has in mendacity, ill nature and envy, which are taken as granted as being its law.” Again: “When the ecclesiastical world is worldly, it is only a caricature of the world. It is the world, not only in greater mediocrity, but even in greater ugliness.” Yet again: “There is nothing more demanding than the taste for mediocrity. Beneath its ever-moderate appearance, there is nothing more intemperate, nothing surer of its instinct, nothing more pitiless in its refusals. It suffers no greatness, shows beauty no mercy.”

◆ Sigrid Undset: “I have the sense that I am seeking my sea legs all alone in a world full of currents, and I long for a fixed point of reference that doesn’t alter or slide eel-like away; I long for the old Church on the rock, which has never claimed that a thing is good because it is new or good because it is old, but which, on the contrary, takes for its sacrament wine, which is at its best old, and bread, best fresh.”

◆ A prescient Edward Luttwak writing in 1994:

What does the moderate Right—mainstream US Republicans, British Tories and all their counterparts elsewhere—have to offer? Only more free trade and globalisation, more deregulation and structural change, thus more dislocation of lives and social relations. It is only mildly amusing that nowadays the standard Republican/Tory after-dinner speech is a two-part affair, in which part one celebrates the virtues of unimpeded competition and dynamic structural change, while part two mourns the decline of the family and community “values” that were eroded precisely by the forces commended in part one. Thus at the present time the core of Republican/Tory beliefs is a perfect non-sequitur. And what does the moderate Left have to offer? Only more redistribution, more public assistance, and particularist concern for particular groups that can claim victim status, from the sublime peak of elderly, handicapped, black lesbians down to the merely poor.

◆ James Pogue penned an interesting report on the thinking of Connecticut senator Chris Murphy (“The Senator Warning Democrats of a Crisis Unfolding Beneath Their Noses,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2024). Here’s the senator’s assessment after spending the last two years observing debates in conservative circles, some conducted by anonymous Twitter provocateurs: “What I discovered, much to my chagrin, was that the right—some really irresponsible corners of the right—were having a conversation about the spiritual state of America that was in ways much more relevant than conversations that were happening on the left.” In discussions with Pogue, Murphy expressed worries (in Pogue’s words) “that the New Right was offering two things mainstream Democrats were not: a politics that spoke directly to feelings of alienation from America as we know it today and a political vision of what a rupture with that system might look like.” That’s exactly what we strive to offer in *FIRST THINGS*.

◆ John Henry Newman: “I would rather have to maintain that we ought to begin by believing everything that is offered to our acceptance, than that it is our duty to doubt everything.” Newman is surely right. Newman is not advising blanket credulity. He is formulating a provocative juxtaposition of extremes so as to illuminate the foundation for a life of reason. To believe everything means taking on a great deal of falsehood, but truth as well. The opposite, the Cartesian approach, which so many presume to be the high road of reason, avoids error—at the expense of taking in truths. Better a credulous mind that adheres to truth at the cost of superstition, errant opinion, and foolishness than a mind too fearful of falsehood to close upon truth.

◆ Newman on the same theme, this time framed in terms of Christ's return, which Scripture warns us will be sudden: "True it is, that in many times, many ages, have Christians been mistaken in thinking they discerned Christ's coming, but better a thousand times to think Him coming when he is not, than once to think Him not coming when He is." Where is the foolishness? Is it to be found in the pious man who reads the signs of the times and anticipates Christ's return? Or in the man who notes the many false predictions of past believers and shuns the disposition of anticipation? "Now he must come one day, sooner or later," Newman continues. "Worldly men have their scoff at our failure of discernment now; but whose will be the want of discernment, whose the triumph then?" Newman's logic echoes Pascal's wager. What could be more consequential than to meet our Lord's return with an upturned heart? To be wrong a thousand times is as nothing compared to being right when everything is at stake.

◆ The early-twentieth-century Dominican Thomist A. G. Sertillanges makes a similar point: "We must give ourselves from the heart if truth is to give herself to us," for "truth serves only her slaves." Sertillanges again: "Truth visits those who love her, who surrender to her." Pious acceptance is the foundation of truth-seeking, not today's pseudo-virtue, "critical thinking."

◆ I draw the Sertillanges quotes from *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*. This wonderful book, which remains in print, should be read by anyone who wishes to bring into his life the discipline of serious reading and reflection.

◆ An astute observation by Mike Woodruff: "Modern society lacks a term for sin, so people are categorized as evil."

◆ Adrian Pabst meditating on the West's perverse combination of moral and spiritual aggression and disarmament ("Against the New Barbarisms," *Compact*):

Rather than a productive critical reassessment of its past, the West now risks a suicidal betrayal. Parts of the elites and the population seem to hate the West more than its enemies, to the point of believing that sexual minorities should

support Hamas. Protesters blame all evils of the world on the West while singing the praises of Hamas terrorists and their barbarous killings of innocent Israeli citizens—viewed as legitimate targets, just because they are all deemed to be “colonial settlers.” Western self-loathing is no less nihilistic than the barbarianism it legitimates.

◆ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (from one of his characters in *In the First Circle*): “Prosperity breeds idiots.”

◆ At times I feel dispirited. *Dobbs* exposed the extent of popular support for abortion. Legalized marijuana fills the streets of New York with the stench of weed. Wars grind on in Ukraine and Gaza. Illegal immigrants flow across the border, in spite of popular opposition. When I’m oppressed by the thought that mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, I return to another one of Solzhenitsyn’s insights: “It is up to us to stop seeing Progress (which cannot be stopped by anyone or anything) as a stream of unlimited blessing, and to view it rather as a gift from on high, sent down for an extremely intricate trial of our free will.” The same holds for Regress. Let’s stop wringing our hands and do what we can and must, leaving the ultimate disposition of the affairs of men in God’s hands.

◆ In my meditations above, I commend the phenomenon of cultural Christianity—and suggest that it’s likely to reflect a growing cohort of fellow travelers. If you know someone in this tribe of unbelieving, Christian-friendly dissidents from the Rainbow Reich, please give that person a gift subscription to *FIRST THINGS*.

◆ Many thanks to Ramona Tausz for seven years of excellent editorial work at *FIRST THINGS*. Ramona started as a junior fellow in 2017 and, after two years in that role, stepped up to become an associate and then deputy editor. For many years, she oversaw our web publications. At the opening of his 2023 Erasmus Lecture, Carl Trueman, a regular columnist, singled out Ramona as an editor who unfailingly made his writing clearer, sharper, and more penetrating. He was right to do so. Ramona has been a great asset to our editorial team. We will miss her talent—and her Missouri Synod Lutheran sangfroid.

◆ We have added two new junior fellows to the FIRST THINGS staff. Jacob Akey is a graduate of Saint Anselm College. Germán Saucedo comes to us from Mexico City, where he recently completed a degree in law at Universidad Panamericana.

◆ Claire Giuntini has served as a junior fellow and assistant editor. She is taking a new role at FIRST THINGS as director of the Editor's Circle, our faithful company of supporters who contribute \$1,000 or more each year.

◆ Our annual Intellectual Retreat in early August was a smashing success. Justin Shubow delivered a fine lecture detailing the good, the bad, and the ugly in America's civic architecture. Eighty participants spent a day discussing faith and civic responsibility, a timeless topic that is especially timely right now. Brian Williams and his team of seminar leaders from Templeton Honors College at Eastern University led the discussions with expert skill. Sohrab Ahmari, Mark Bauerlein, and your faithful scribe commented and opined during a concluding panel discussion of the retreat's themes. A special thanks goes to Taylor Posey, who designed a handsome volume of assigned readings.

November 2024

OUR PROBLEM IS DISINTEGRATION

Liberals and conservatives disagree less about principles than we often imagine. (It's common for intellectually inclined, theory-informed people to interpret disagreements about policy as matters of principle.) For example, aside from full-bore revolutionaries, everyone endorses the rule of law, even as we sometimes violate that principle in the heat of political battle. I regard the prosecutions of Trump as political in nature, something liberals tolerate (or refuse to acknowledge) because they think the stakes are so high that principle must be relaxed. They convince themselves that bending the rule of law is necessary to prevent a demagogue from gaining power and flouting that same rule of law. The same line of reasoning justifies social media censorship and other illiberal collusions of government and corporate power to suppress speech.

This inconsistency among liberals illustrates my point: Our judgments about political and social realities are often more decisive than our principles. If Trump in fact represents a threat to our constitutional system, if he commands a proto-fascist army of ardent supporters, then dire countermeasures are justified, even extra-constitutional ones.

I don't share the liberal establishment's assessment of Trump, but I don't want to litigate the immediate issue. My disagreement goes much deeper than any dispute over Trump's rhetoric, personality, and role in American politics. As I've talked with my liberal friends, I've come to see that we have fundamentally different assessments of the central problems facing our country. They fear a closed-minded hostility to the "other." I worry about the disintegration of crucial institutions and anchoring authorities.

Liberals think our society is too homogeneous, judgmental, hidebound, and restrictive. To some extent, this judgment is inherent to the progressive mind. Progressives seek to be open to the future, which they believe can be better and brighter—provided we're willing to free ourselves from present constraints and embrace new possibilities.

The unique circumstances of the twentieth century encouraged this attitude. After World War II, liberals interpreted fascism as arising from a "closed-minded" mentality. Erich Fromm's widely read book, *Escape from Freedom*, was a psychological version of this interpretation. A frightened, disoriented populace turns to authoritarian leaders because people fear the uncertainties and responsibilities of modern freedom. Another influential book, *The Authoritarian Personality* by Theodor Adorno and a team of social scientists, described traditional views of parental authority and sexual morality as

proto-fascist. On this view, conservative sensibilities became suspect. They were symptoms of psychological disorder and harbingers of totalitarianism.

Few Baby Boomers have read these books. But having grown up during a period that was uniquely homogeneous, they were sympathetic to the main thrust of these and similar assessments of the dangers facing the West. After the war, the American middle class expanded dramatically. Society was governed by a largely traditional morality that prized being “normal.” In the 1950s, social scientists such as David Reisman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, worried about the pervasive conformity of that era.

The 1960s brought many changes. The civil rights movement challenged bourgeois complacency. The sexual revolution took hold. Yet even amidst cultural uproar, marked by riots and anti-war protests, the homogeneity was palpable. Everyone watched the same TV shows. The then-young Baby Boomers thrilled to top-40 hits. Moreover, the decades after World War II were a time of extraordinary demographic stability. Aside from wartime refugees, immigration was minimal. By 1970, the percent of non-native born residents in the United States was at a historic low of less than 5 percent. (In 1890, that population had been nearly 15 percent; today it is reaching that level again.)

These factors, ideological, cultural, and demographic, fueled a consensus in favor of openness: the open-society consensus. It took unity and stability for granted and focused on the failures, injustices, and dangers of an overly consolidated society. To this day, being liberal means adopting the open-society consensus.

Consider the sixty-year-old Ivy League graduate and corporate lawyer. He is by no means radical. But he’s troubled by Trump’s harsh talk about deporting those who are here illegally, and he places a sign in his front yard: “In this house we believe . . .” He regrets some of the excesses of Black Lives Matter, but endorses the view that racism remains a major social evil. He’d rather not think about drag queens, transgender surgeries, and the chaos at the border, but if pressed, he’ll assert that we should reduce social stigma and make our society more inclusive. He believes that diversity enriches and strengthens the body politic.

I’m baffled by these sentiments, not because they are wicked, but because they are so disconnected from present realities. I look at America in 2024 and see a globalized and financialized economy that has eroded the foundations of middle-class prosperity. We’ve witnessed the striking decline of marriage and the near complete acceptance of all sexual practices. (Will the *New Yorker* ever tire of running articles about “throuples” and other deviant practices?) The old, censorious morality no longer exists, much less dominates. Charles Murray’s 2012 book, *Coming Apart*, documents the nearly complete secession of society’s winners from those who have been abandoned and damaged by

the economic and cultural revolutions of recent decades. Demographic change—collapsing birthrates combined with high levels of immigration—is accelerating. Our body politic is increasingly fragmented, sometimes to the point of open hostility.

In a word, our society is threatened with disintegration. In the face of this peril, the regnant liberal consensus is worse than irrelevant; it's part of the problem. Take as an example the southern border. Polling indicates that voters overwhelmingly favor stopping the influx of migrants. Yet the Biden administration does nothing, because liberal elites are beholden to the open-society consensus. Or consider the sad fact that children born to mothers without a college degree are likely to have no fathers in their homes. The response of liberal elites? Make Pride Month the nation's most sacred celebration. Huge numbers are dying of drug overdoses—and liberal elites legalize marijuana.

There's an academic fashion called "queer theory." Unlike older efforts to secure gay rights, queer theory does not argue for the acceptance of homosexuality as normal. On the contrary, it opposes the notion that *anything* should be normative. "Queering" society means demolishing social authority, deconsolidating and disintegrating institutions that impose standards and censure deviance. This ambition is extreme, to be sure. University presidents, trustees, and other elites don't embrace it. But the imperative of radical deconsolidation and disintegration makes sense within the open-society consensus, which is why universities hire and promote faculty who advance queer theory, just as they sponsor colloquia on critical race theory, programs of postcolonial studies, and other instruments of disintegration.

In *Return of the Strong Gods*, I argue that the open-society consensus has become a flesh-eating monster. We are living in a deconsolidated and disintegrated world, one that lacks the strong loves and loyalties that anchor personal and collective life. We need a new consensus that recognizes that fascism, middle-class complacency, racism, and other dangers of an over-consolidated society were our grandfathers' problems. Our challenges are quite different. They can be summed up as the dangers of drowning in a liquid world.

We're seeing the first signs of change. Both political parties have strong voices urging a pivot away from globalization and toward re-industrialization. This shift in economic policy gives priority to reconsolidation. Both candidates for president have proposed significant subsidies for newborn children—another sign of awareness that we need to buttress the fundamental institution of society, the family, rather than celebrating an infinite variety of "lifestyle choices." Some are calling for a chastened foreign policy, another sign of the turn toward reconsolidation.

And we can observe a parallel spiritual trend, one that emphasizes God's authority. Yes, we're called to sanctify the world, but many are aware that we first must re-sanctify the church. We can't "go to the peripheries," as Pope Francis urges, unless the center holds.

I'm convinced that a new consensus will take hold in the twenty-first century. (Alec Ryrie suggests something similar in "The End of the Age of Hitler" in this issue.) At some point, perhaps soon, responsible leaders will recognize that we need to do the opposite of "queering"; we need to restore the stable anchors of spiritual, moral, and political life. When that change comes, the application of principles—left, right, and center—will change as well.

Richard John Neuhaus

Does the founder of FIRST THINGS matter in 2024? It's a question that Aaron Renn asks in his Substack newsletter. He was prompted by James Davison Hunter's recent book, *Democracy and Solidarity*. Hunter pairs John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr as exemplary figures in mid-twentieth-century America. A prolific writer, Dewey was an influential voice for progressivism in politics and education. Arguably the most widely read American Protestant theologian of his generation, Reinhold Niebuhr helped many see the dangers of liberalism's naive optimism.

Hunter also pairs Richard Rorty with Richard John Neuhaus. Both exercised significant influence in the later decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of this one. Rorty, like Dewey, was a spokesman for pragmatism in philosophy and progressivism in politics. As readers of FIRST THINGS know, Neuhaus endorsed orthodoxy in religion, truth in morality, and, like Niebuhr, a chastened liberalism in politics—the outlook that came to be known as neoconservatism.

Renn observes that in both instances the progressive paladin enjoys lasting notoriety, whereas the figure on the right has faded from public view. I think he is mistaken.

I don't wish to dispute Dewey's influence. More than any other figure, he steered American liberalism toward a cocksure progressivism that pretends to be nothing more than common sense applied to changing social circumstances. His theories of learning and pedagogy have helped produce today's dysfunctional educational culture. All true, but my point is this: In the last fifty years, few have read John Dewey, except when assigned to do so in an advanced college seminar on the history of American philosophy or educational theory. There are good reasons why Dewey's work is neglected. I recently read his 1919 book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. It's a treasure trove of progressive rhetoric masquerading as argument, rhetoric still very much with us today. But my reading of the book was the exception. Few people interested in contemporary philosophy, politics, or religion would pick up that volume. I'm willing to bet that

Reconstruction in Philosophy has not been read by anyone who earned a Ph.D. in philosophy in the last forty years, beyond a few specialists in the history of pragmatism (and eccentric pundits like me).

By contrast, Reinhold Niebuhr's books are not preserved in the amber of college syllabi. As Renn notes, Obama called him his favorite theologian. Michael Mandelbaum cites Niebuhr at the outset of his 2016 book on the naive humanitarian interventionism that has shipwrecked American foreign policy. I've heard sermons that refer to Niebuhr's insights. It's not hard to imagine a young person who wants to gain a theological perspective on politics picking up *Christianity and Power Politics* or *Christian Realism and Political Problems* and reading them with a general rather than specialized interest.

What accounts for this difference? By its very nature, Dewey's pragmatic philosophy ties him to his historical moment. Truth is whatever promotes progress, and progressive activists in 2024 have moved beyond Dewey's concerns. His "truth" is no longer useful. Foucault and others long ago supplanted him as touchstones. Niebuhr's work was also tied to the issues and concerns of his time. But the sinews of his thought are biblical, which means that a contemporary Christian—indeed, a secular person sensible of the biblical DNA of Western culture—can enter into his thought and draw insights.

As a professor, I often taught Introduction to Christianity. One assignment was Martin Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*. Like or dislike that short treatise, students had little difficulty reading the text and grasping its paradoxical argument. As a teacher, I reflected on this remarkable fact. How could a five-hundred-year-old book be so immediately accessible? The answer is simple: Luther uses idioms and concepts drawn from St. Paul's letters, elements of the living language of the church. Reinhold Niebuhr was not a great theologian. But he, too, speaks the language of the church, which means that his books will be accessible and relevant for as long as the church continues to form the minds of believers.

The fates of Rorty and Neuhaus are different from those of Dewey and Niebuhr. Rorty made a big splash with his 1979 book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It was a convincing attack on the formalized rationalism that was the dominant mode of philosophy in American universities. In the 1980s, Rorty wrote widely read essays that sought to develop a pragmatic philosophy akin to Dewey's, whose reputation he championed. Truth is what works, and Rorty defines "what works" as that which enlarges and advances the achievements of American liberalism.

My copies of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Consequences of Pragmatism* are heavily underlined. I have relished Rorty's fine essay on George Orwell. But I doubt that Rorty's work will find readers in the future. Like Dewey's, his pragmatic philosophy

assigns priority to whatever brings about a better future, and thus he theorized his own irrelevance as history moves forward. Moreover, unlike Dewey, Rorty was not an activist or institution builder. (Dewey was the most significant figure at Columbia Teachers College, the institution that did a great deal to transform public education in the twentieth century.) This difference means that historians won't feature Rorty's name prominently in histories of late-twentieth-century American progressive politics. In histories of philosophy, I doubt that he will be much mentioned, any more than is Josiah Royce, a once famous philosopher who flourished one hundred years before Richard Rorty attained his own fleeting fame.

Richard John Neuhaus filled countless pages with his prose. He commented on church politics and secular politics, theological controversies and moral debates, cultural trends and literary masterpieces. It's fair to say that he invented blogging *avant la lettre*. He perfected the art of fluid commentary on the passing scene in "The Public Square" and "While We're At It," columns I perpetuate, albeit with far less brio and in briefer compass. His most widely known book, *The Naked Public Square* (1986), defended the then-influential Religious Right as a legitimate voice in the American tradition of democratic deliberation and debate. He authored many other books, and he had his finger in numerous projects and publications over the years.

Some of Neuhaus's output falls into the genre of highbrow journalism. He also penned works of pastoral theology, aiming to help clergy understand their vocations. He reflected on his brush with death, and he wrote about the central truths of the Christian faith. His range was broad, but his idiom was consistently theological. He therefore shares with Reinhold Niebuhr a certain timelessness, born of participation in the ongoing life of the church. Neuhaus's meditation on the last words of Jesus from the Cross, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, is exemplary in this regard. It has been and will remain a popular book. I can easily imagine that this book, unlike anything written by Richard Rorty, will be selected fifty years from now by a Christian fellowship as a basis for spiritual reflection during Holy Week. Faithful exposition of the words of Scripture does not go out of style.

Like Dewey, Neuhaus was an activist and institution builder. Possessed of a gift for friendship, he was a leader who empowered others and won their loyalty. *FIRST THINGS* endures because of Neuhaus. He put his stamp on our publication: orthodox in theology, unapologetic in witness, confident in assertion, wide-ranging in interest, stern in warning, and cheerful in celebration. More importantly, he assembled around himself a community of writers and readers who carried forward his projects, interests, and passions after his death.

Most authors are swallowed by time. Nearly all that is published is foredoomed to be unread and forgotten. Those who survive are most often more than writers. Some are devoted teachers. I have no doubt that Leo Strauss endures because he inspired a cohort of brilliant graduate students, who went on to assign and discuss his books with subsequent generations. Others are activists and builders of institutions. Public schools are named after John Dewey, not because he wrote timeless treatises, but because he led the progressive educational movement. The same will hold for Richard John Neuhaus. The lasting influence of *FIRST THINGS* is rightly seen as his legacy. And that legacy includes more than this publication. Neuhaus theorized the role of religion in public life. He advocated for it tirelessly, and he organized to ensure its perdurance. The wide array of religious writers, policymakers, and politicians (some of whom hotly insist that theological principles, properly understood, militate against positions taken in *FIRST THINGS*) testify to his influence.

Let's imagine an American future. It will feature Christian and Jewish communities that, though not majorities, are nevertheless vigorous and substantial. In this future, secular progressives will be seen as representatives of a discredited past. The rainbow flag will have been retired. The country won't be a biblical republic; theocrats won't be in charge. But in this future, men and women of faith, educated in the best traditions of the West, possessed of a flexible, capacious outlook, and able to articulate moral principles that are not the exclusive province of the religious believer, will exercise outsized influence. If this future comes to pass—it is our ambition—there is no doubt that historians will highlight the role of Richard John Neuhaus.

Christian Populism

More than three decades ago, Nathan Hatch published *The Democratization of American Christianity*, a history of the Second Great Awakening, arguably the most important religious episode in American history. At the recent Intercollegiate Studies Institute annual homecoming, I served on a panel that discussed the award-winning book. It was a pleasure to do so. Hatch gives a magisterial account of the upsurge of religious populism that shaped the new American republic in decisive ways. Anyone who wants to understand the last ten years of American politics should read *The Democratization of American Christianity*.

Denunciations of the “swamp” echo the Second Great Awakening’s polemics against the clerical establishment of its day, which itinerate preachers derided as complacent, more interested in high salaries and comfortable parsonages than in gospel preaching. Trump rallies follow in the tradition of raucous, call-and-response camp meetings. Commentators wonder at the fact that respectable people support Trump, not knowing that some of the most important leaders of the religious populism of the early 1800s

were elites such as Barton Stone, who embraced the new, raw, and uncouth style of religious revival.

Elias Smith was a renegade preacher and journalist who, in 1808, launched America's first religious newspaper, *Herald of Gospel Liberty*. He mocked and abused the Calvinist grandees, the "clerical hierarchy" that dominated Protestantism at that time. Establishment clergy like Lyman Beecher raged against preachers like Smith who were disturbing the religious landscape. It does not take much imagination to cast Tucker Carlson in the role of a latter-day Elias Smith. He thrills his populist devotees and outrages the guardians of political respectability such as George Will, a Lyman Beecher of our time.

Hatch raises larger themes. The Second Great Awakening took place during a time of rapid social change. The new republic gave rise to radicalisms of many sorts. People were on the move, as territories west of the Appalachian Mountains were settled. Old institutions and authorities lost their power. As I note above, recent decades have seen similar changes. Globalization, demographic change, the sexual revolution, social media, and other factors have precipitated a quite different but equally significant crisis of authority. We should not be surprised, therefore, that populism has returned, as it did in the late 1800s, when America was transformed by industrialization, urbanization, and swelling waves of immigrants.

Hatch documents that revivalist preachers were confident that their individualist, evangelical Christianity would fulfill the sacred mission of America. In their sermons and broadsides, populist religion mixed freely with populist politics, as was the case for William Jennings Bryan and subsequent American populists. Today's Trumpian populism is different. To be sure, many pious people support Trump and other populist politicians. Avatars of popular religion like Paula White lurk on the peripheries. But the movement lacks an explicitly religious dimension, which is striking when we compare it to the administration of George W. Bush, an establishment figure who was not shy about his evangelical convictions.

Which makes me wonder: In spite of fascinating parallels to the outpouring of Christian enthusiasm and political radicalism in the Second Great Awakening, does today's populism ironically contribute to an important elite ambition, the establishment of a post-Christian, entirely secular political culture in America? I hope not.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the moral inversions that took hold in 1930s Germany. The inversions were often theologically baptized as fitting reactions to the

moralizing complacency of bourgeois Christianity. Here is a sharply worded passage from his *Ethics*:

The justification of the good has been replaced by the justification of the wicked; the idealization of good citizenship has given way to the idealization of its opposite, of disorder, chaos, anarchy and catastrophe; the forgiving love of Jesus for the sinful woman, for the adulteress and publican, has been misrepresented for psychological or political reasons, in order to make of it a Christian sanctioning of anti-social 'marginal existences,' prostitutes and traitors to their country. In seeking to recover the power of the gospel this protest unintentionally transformed the gospel of the sinner into a commendation of sin.

Transgression liberates! Perversion opens new and more inclusive horizons! The mentality Bonhoeffer criticizes is very much with us today.

◆ Speaking of reversals: Adam Smith-Connor is being prosecuted in Great Britain. His crime? Engaging in silent prayer for his aborted son near an abortion clinic. Apparently, this act is prohibited behavior within a four-block zone around the abortion clinic. Christian piety prohibited; a temple of child sacrifice protected. Would it be harmful to the witness of the Church if a dozen priests were arrested for doing as Smith-Connor has done?

◆ Brad Littlejohn on the proper role of pessimism (from his regular musings, "Commonwealth Dispatches"):

We must reject the pragmatic premise that self-deceit is better than honesty if it produces better immediate results. There comes a point in every life when a man must have the clear-eyed courage to look the end of all his strivings squarely in the face, rather than listening to doctors who promise him he'll be back on his feet in no time. For the Christian, death is not the end, either for an individual or for a civilization. We can face our cultural decline with the world-renewing vision of a Benedict or a Boethius only if we are willing to look beyond the possible death of our own social world toward the new ones the Lord may have in store.

◆ Oren Cass takes on the phenomenon of tiger-mom parenting. He notes that today's parents are far more anxious to give their kids every advantage in life than they were in previous generations. But outcomes are perversely worse, not better.

Everyone agrees that parenting has gotten wildly more intensive in recent decades. The data do not provide evidence of improved outcomes. Kids are not more emotionally resilient—almost surely less so. Their mental health is worse. Their test scores are lower. Those who go to college arrive less able to handle living on their own or doing the coursework. Heck, young men's wages are no higher than they were 50 years ago. For the first time, in the 2010s, young Americans aged 18 to 34 were more likely to be living at home with their parents than in their own home with a partner. Serious question: How much worse could we do here?

Cass makes suggestions: “Alongside the push to get phones and social media apps out of young hands, could we convert youth sports back to gaggles of kids chasing a ball around the field in town?” And what about the great scramble to get Junior into a selective university? Well-to-do parents encourage their kids to enroll in enrichment programs and take internships with save-the-world organizations, both regarded as key elements of successful college applications these days. Cass suggests refocusing admissions on standardized tests. He's right to do so. Setting one or two hurdles in their paths leaves teenagers with a great deal more freedom to be teenagers instead of groomed thoroughbreds.

◆ I came of age in the 1970s. In those years, the SAT carried a great deal of weight. As a result, my sometimes-dissolute participation in boring high school classes and my imperfect compliance with class requirements were not dispositive. Moreover, Kaplan and other test prep companies were not yet perceived as necessities. One simply took the test on the assigned day. Say what you will about the “unfairness” of admission on the basis of test scores, the arrangement was a great deal less stressful than today's system.

◆ The University of Pennsylvania is offering a writing seminar, “Abolish the Family.” From the course description: “In this seminar, we will look at the history of family abolition and its threads through various other movements, examine variations in cultural models of the family, and imagine new models of collective care together.” Again, the open-society consensus blesses courses like this. It tells us that the decline of

mental health among the young, like all other problems, arises from overly repressive institutions. Disintegrate the family, and life will be more fluid, flexible, and fulfilling!

◆ As Penn indulges every fashion on the left, it punishes conservatives. After two years of disciplinary proceedings against law professor (and *FIRST THINGS* author) Amy Wax, the university upheld the sanctions it had imposed for her “crimes,” one of which was to notice that a middle-class work ethic and self-discipline can do much to bring about success in life, another of which was to notice that affirmative action misplaces unprepared black students into academically competitive environments, which is why they often end up in the lower reaches of class rankings. These and other statements were adduced as evidence that Wax creates a “discriminatory environment,” even though no evidence has been brought forward showing that Wax has discriminated against her students.

◆ After lamenting the missteps of the present pontificate, a friend observed: “On the other hand, I went to the Latin Mass today at St. Rita’s in Alexandria, VA. It was standing room only, and there were so many children on the laps of so many veiled mothers, it was hard not to feel at least a little hopeful about the future of the Church.”

◆ In the preface to his 1989 collection of essays, *The Philosopher on Dover Beach*, Roger Scruton writes:

The culture of Europe, and the civilization that has sprung from it, are not yet dead. The opportunity remains to give our best to them, and to receive, in reward, the experience of belonging. For a century or more, Western man has listened to prophecies of his own decline, has been schooled in guilt and self-abnegation, and has doubted the civilizing force of his beliefs, his institutions and his way of life. Since nothing has ever been put in the place of those good things, save tinsel illusions and lawless power, the result of this self-repudiation has been a kind of active nihilism—a nihilism not of the mind and soul only, but of the forms of social life and the structures of political power.

I dare say that active nihilism has gotten stronger in the ensuing decades (“Abolish the family!”). Still, opportunities for recovery and restoration remain. Indeed, they have perhaps multiplied, as the proliferation of schools dedicated to classical education suggests and my friend’s observations about the Latin Mass indicate. What’s needed

these days is an active piety, a spirit of affirmation devoted to repair, that faces down active nihilism.

◆ *New York Times* religion writer Ruth Graham reports on the growing gaps between men and women. Gen-Z men are less likely to graduate from college than their female peers. In many major cities, they earn less than women. There's a countertrend, however: Young men are spiritually ahead of their female peers. Graham: "It is young men who now register higher in attachment to basic Christian beliefs, in church attendance and in frequency of Bible reading." They place a higher value on family life, as well. Graham notes a recent Pew survey: "Childless young men are likelier than childless young women to say they want to become parents someday, by a margin of 12 percentage points." Young men are more conservative politically, overwhelmingly more likely to vote for Trump than Harris. Young women break in the opposite direction. Overall, it seems that the rising generation of women is increasingly loyal to the progressive promise that life's greatest satisfactions are material: career, travel, consumption. Young men are turning in a different, countercultural direction. I fear that the war between the sexes is likely to get worse, not better.

◆ Kamala Harris has largely refrained from staking out policy positions—except on the question of abortion-on-demand. In a September 23 interview, she advocated for encoding into federal law the abortion-on-demand regime that held sway under *Roe*. Here is what she said:

I think we should eliminate the filibuster for Roe, and get us to the point where 51 votes would be what we need to put back into law the protections for reproductive freedom and for the ability of every person and every woman to make decisions about their [sic] own body and not have their [sic] government tell them [sic] what to do.

Donald Trump's betrayals of the pro-life cause are disappointing. Harris's enthusiasm for abortion, shared by far too many Democrats, is chilling.

◆ On September 20, senior editor Julia Yost and regular columnist Liel Leibovitz joined me for our first-ever Editor's Circle webinar. Our theme was "The Promise of Renewal." Where do we see the active piety that I describe above, the antidote to active nihilism?

The Editor's Circle is our community of core supporters. To learn more and make an Editor's Circle gift, visit *Support*.

◆ I'm pleased to announce that Veronica Clarke will serve as deputy editor, overseeing our web publications. Vicky was a junior fellow from 2019 through 2021, and she has served as associate editor for the last three years.

December 2024

MERE CHRISTENDOM

Douglas Wilson argues for what ought to be uncontroversial: governance by wise Christians. He calls it “mere Christendom” in a recent book by that name, described as democratic politics in a constitutional regime that produces Christian-influenced laws. In other words, the not-so-long-ago culture of the West. Wilson argues that secularism takes us down a dead-end road. The future of a free society requires the restoration of divine authority—not clergy in seats of power, but rather the gospel in the hearts of the powerful. The governors must recognize that they are governed.

An influential Presbyterian pastor, teacher, and author, Wilson calls himself a “theocratic libertarian.” In *Mere Christendom*, he does not argue that Christian governance is merely compatible with personal liberty, including the liberty of those who don’t believe in the tenets of Christianity. That’s true enough. But more importantly, Wilson argues that recognition of divine authority is necessary for a free society: “Some sort of mere Christendom is the only place where it is possible to gain and maintain true liberty.”

Mere Christendom reads like a jazz improvisation. The book’s contents are drawn from a “smoking slag heap of words” that Wilson has generated on his blog over the years. His grandson took up the challenge and abbreviated and synthesized the material into a book-length treatment of a very FIRST THINGS question: What should be the role of religion in public life? Ample, answers Wilson. We need divine authority to sustain America’s culture of freedom.

The main argument draws upon the Bible’s warnings against the perils of idolatry. We are hardwired to worship, which means that if we turn away from the true God, we will chase after false gods. There is a political analogue: “The public square cannot be neutral.” Either our civic life will harken to the authority of the true God, or we will organize our common affairs around some other, imagined supreme power, a false god. And because idols are mute, the rejection of the true God in fact clears the way for men to lord over us. Wilson puts it succinctly: “If there is no God above the state, then the state has become god—the point past which there is no appeal.”

As Wilson notes, many assume that a high view of divine authority corresponds to a high degree of control and coercion. But this assumption is mistaken. In Romans 13, St. Paul teaches that the magistrate acts under the authority of God. But note well that God has revealed his will and purpose. The magistrate is accountable. By contrast, when God is not recognized by a body politic, powerful men conjure ideologies to justify their

dominion. As Wilson puts it, without mere Christendom, “I am far more likely to be governed by a swaggering bully who recognizes no authority whatsoever above him than by a swaggering bully who feels he needs to justify his behavior from Scripture. In a dispute with the latter, I at least have something to appeal to.”

Strictly speaking, the stark opposition—either Jesus is acknowledged as Lord, or men are unaccountable bullies—overstates the case. An earnest Straussian would identify “natural right” as a constraint upon government. A Catholic like me appeals to “natural law.” But abortion, same-sex marriage, the embrace of reproductive technologies, and the transgender juggernaut suggest that, having dismissed the Creator, our secular culture accords no authority to nature. Thomas Aquinas anticipated our unfortunate state of affairs. Darkened by sin, our minds fail to recognize natural truths, which is why God delivered the Ten Commandments to restore, by divine authority, the truths we ought to know by reason alone. A sociopolitical corollary follows: We need a restoration of biblical authority in public life if we’re to have any hope of recovering natural right or natural law.

Another argument for the Christian basis for America’s culture of freedom rests in the foundational role that liberty plays in God’s relations to his creatures. Wilson observes, as have many others, that religious liberty is a distinctly Christian idea, rooted in the fact that fellowship with God requires a free act of obedience. Wilson goes further, arguing that “letting other people express their errors without reprisal is a distinctly Christian ideal.” He allows that Christendom featured a great deal of persecution (what regime has not?), but he insists that the best of modern liberalism has Christian roots.

St. Paul uses martial imagery: We are to put on the full armor of God. But note well that our belt is truth, and the sword we are to wield is the Word of God. The imperative is to proclaim in word, deed, and truth. Wilson emphasizes patience and forbearance in the face of error and unbelief: “We are given the truth by the grace of God, and part of that truth includes how we are to treat those who have not embraced it yet.” The words of Jesus are our marching orders: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 3:35).

In *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Larry Siedentop makes a detailed case for Wilson’s assertion that Christianity provided the precondition for the notions that underly the First Amendment and other American guarantees of liberty. Rather than making a historical argument, Wilson relies on straightforward observations about present realities. Our increasingly anti-Christian secular elite harbors hostility to time-honored American freedoms. Recently, John Kerry expressed regret about the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech. He said it is a “major block” to a purportedly necessary censorship of “disinformation.”

Wilson does not mention the role that belief in God's governance of human affairs plays in sustaining a culture of freedom. Kerry's remarks reflect the view that the smart and well-informed must manage and control unruly public opinion. The censorship of "disinformation" is part of the wider technocratic hubris that arises when we no longer believe in divine providence. In his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln allowed that the final disposition of justice remains in God's hands. Today, we are harried by social justice warriors who presume to wrest from God the role of final judge, monitoring our speech, even to the point of regulating pronoun use. Wilson is right. When God no longer reigns, freedom is among the first casualties.

Without doubt, our bondage to sin poses the greatest threat to our freedom. After all, isn't freedom the ability to do what you want? Even by that thin, libertarian definition, secular America fails. People do not marry with the intention of getting divorced. Yet they fail to stay married. Young men are not setting out to die of drug overdoses, yet tens of thousands do so every year. Parents do not aim to neglect their children out of selfishness, disordered behavior, and addiction—yet they do so. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul bemoans: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15). As Christianity recedes, a self-defeating condition of unfreedom prevails.

As I've observed many times in this column, even the well-placed feel constrained. The idols of health, wealth, and pleasure command endless sacrifices. I'm depressed by the way in which rich parents press their children to run the gauntlet to get into prestigious universities. The twenty-somethings I meet in New York are often anxious and fearful—not emotions congenial to freedom.

The problem is not merely personal. As the Founders recognized, democratic self-government requires a substantial body of self-governing citizens. A demoralized populace is disordered and unruly. Like children, those who fail to gain self-command must be governed, sometimes with vigilance and a heavy hand. Wilson rightly notes: "A people who are enslaved to their lusts will never be the kind of people who successfully throw off tyrants." Indeed, they may well erect a tyranny. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, an atomized, lonely, and anxious body politic will beg for "an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate." We should not be surprised that young people, raised in a post-Christian culture, do not endorse free speech and express high levels of support for socialism.

Count me among those sympathetic to mere Christendom. The old Christendom was imperfect, as Wilson acknowledges. Fallen men don't construct ideal regimes. The American version of Christendom depended upon a loose-limbed alliance of Protestant denominations that often cooperated, sometimes warred with each other, and until the

mid-twentieth century were hostile to Catholicism. But America's Christian consensus undergirded a decent society, which is not a small thing, as we are discovering in our low and unhappy age—the age of secularism's triumph. That consensus provided the metaphysical and spiritual foundations for the liberal tradition in America, again imperfect, but far from nothing.

Today, the foundations have weakened, and we're less free. It will require the rebuilding of spiritual capital to restore a culture of freedom. Putting the Ten Commandments in school rooms is a reasonable place to start. They command, to be sure, but they do not coerce. Parents are free to catechize their children in today's gospel of autonomy. But at least the kids will have some hint of the truth, a small step toward mere Christendom.

Theologizing Politics

In a recent essay (“The Conversion of Public Intellectuals,” *Comment Magazine*, Fall 2024), the newly installed Canon and Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Christ Church, Oxford, Luke Bretherton, succumbs to a common modern temptation. He theologizes political disagreement. His targets are those who regard Christianity as “a bulwark against the imminent collapse of the West into barbarism of one kind or another.” He takes aim at Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Jordan Peterson, and others who credit Christianity with the moral and spiritual gravity needed to combat woke ideologies.

As I've written recently (“Fellow Travelers,” October 2024), Christianity is not an “asset” to deploy in political struggles, even consequential ones. We have faith in Christ because we believe him to be the Son of God incarnate, not because Christianity serves as an indispensable foundation for Western civilization. But we can walk and chew gum at the same time. It's not a betrayal of faith for Hirsi Ali both to gaze upward to God with a spirit of devotion and to note that central truths of human nature are being violated by today's progressive crusades, truths underscored by Christian teaching.

In Bretherton's account, those who regret the trajectory of contemporary society are guilty of nostalgia. They adopt a “simultaneously apocalyptic and conservative framework” that “divides history between modernity and all prior ages, a division that sacralizes the past (often an idealized modern era) and demonizes the present.”

Such a characterization ill suits Hirsi Ali. She's been an ardent proponent of classical liberalism, a decidedly modern outlook that she believes is threatened by woke illiberalism. Christianity, in her view, holds out the promise of renewing and redeeming modernity. The same can be said of Douglas Wilson. *Mere Christendom* argues that we need a Christian consensus in order to sustain classical liberalism.

Although he refrains from stating his position openly, Bretherton seems concerned to characterize opposition to immigration and multiculturalism as inherently un-Christian: “Approaches that predetermine what Christianity can and should be by overidentifying it with a prior culture or historical moment refuse to discover what Christ and the Spirit are doing here and now among these people in this place.” These and other assertions seem to amount to this assessment: Faced with mass migration and globalist ideologies, conservatives are not making a good faith effort to understand the ethical duties of political leaders to the citizens of their own countries. No, they are “nostalgic and reactionary.”

Bretherton goes on: “Such a refusal [to harken to Christ and the Spirit] also denies how loss, vulnerability, and lack of control are central to the experience of acting faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly with and for others.” Like so many elites, Bretherton seems happy to volunteer low-skilled laborers for wage competition. (“Sorry, we can’t stop illegal immigration. We need to embrace our lack of control.”) Note as well that the Venezuelan gangs in Colorado who crossed the border in the present era of non-enforcement aren’t taking over apartment complexes in the wealthy neighborhoods populated by people who have signs announcing, “No human being is illegal.” Apparently, efforts to prevent wage competition and organized criminal gangs are un-Christian. “The desire to reassert control over a culture or nation is itself an expression of the lust for domination and a vainglorious pride that Augustine identifies as a defining expression of sin, one that leads to great evil.”

Like many progressive Christians, Bretherton is unwittingly a thoroughgoing integralist. “Becoming Christian is properly about discovering—with these people, in this place, in this time—communion with Christ amid and through our differences.” That is indeed true for the Church. The body of Christ transcends nations and cultures. But it’s not true for a nation or civilization. Becoming an American means entering into a distinct culture and history. Unless one is an integralist of the very strictest observance, a nation does not seek unity in Christ. Wilson’s *Mere Christendom* makes no such claim. Rather, a nation attains “communion” in and through its political forms and national traditions. Political leaders may recognize a nation’s duty to give comfort and succor to refugees and others. (In fact, only Christian nations recognize such a duty—another reason to support Wilson’s notion of mere Christendom.) But leaders must balance this imperative with their more fundamental duty to preserve the body politic. It’s a perversion of Christianity to say that a father must sacrifice his family’s well-being for the sake of “inclusion.” The same holds for nations and their leaders.

Jacques Maritain wins Bretherton’s approval. According to Bretherton, the French intellectual underwent a true Christian conversion “to love of neighbor manifested in a commitment to democracy, human rights, and anti-racist politics.” Bretherton goes on to endorse James Chappel’s characterization of Maritain’s 1936 work, *Integral*

Humanism, as a “furiously antifascist, antiracist, and anticapitalist tract.” On this basis, “Maritain developed a philosophical and theological defense of a pluralistic, democratic form of politics.” Apparently, the political uses of Christianity that accord with Bretherton’s outlook are okay.

The contradictions are rife. How can one be anticapitalist without rejecting modernity, which has been profoundly shaped by capitalism? Fascism was a purely modern ideology, and rejecting it requires deep thought about the perversions of modernity that give birth to it. And so Bretherton’s framing of his criticisms collapses. Hirsi Ali, Kingsnorth, Jordan Peterson, and others seek to assess the perils of our present moment, and they sift our inheritance for lasting truths that can help us navigate in our difficult times. It’s jejune to appeal to tiresome slogans about “nostalgic and reactionary politics.” I fear that Bretherton ends up with his own simplistic dichotomy: To be progressive is to be Christian; to be a critic of progressivism shows that one is not a Christian.

Age of Abandonment

Beneath what looks like the age of entitlement, below the culture of narcissism, this is the age of abandonment.” So writes Freya India in her Substack, “Girls.” She says that her Gen-Z cohort has come of age in a time when traditional institutions of support and belonging have collapsed. The liquefaction of norms, institutions, and traditions triggers a pervasive fear that one is doomed to be alone in the world—abandoned.

India observes that neighborhoods are no longer thick networks of connection. Social bonds are weak: “Forget loving our neighbors, we can’t even make eye contact with them.” The very word “community” has been debased, referring to “abstract *concepts* like the LGBT community or mental health communities.” Such notions lack reality and solidity—“which is why whenever someone says something like *online communities are a lifeline for young people!* I feel like screaming because it’s just so bleak. What have we done?”

India focuses on homelife, which is in tatters. “Our parents are strangers to one another; our childhood a series of exchanges from one house to the next. No real *home*, no place to belong.” Her experience is not unique. “By age 14, nearly half of first-born children in the UK no longer live with both their mother and father.” Similar rates of single-parent households obtain in the United States. More than one-third of children grow up in homes from which their fathers are absent.

These are difficult circumstances for children. They are made worse by the fact that we are not permitted to offer consolation or speak openly about the suffering.

Ours is a culture choking on its own compassion yet offering next to none for children of divorce. We are the first generation to grow up without stigma around family breakdown, but near total normalisation of it. And when you normalise something, you stigmatise the reaction. So many marriages end; what did you expect? Your friends' families are the same; what's wrong with you. It's just a contract anyway. Kids are resilient. All this tells us that abandonment is trivial. That if you feel deeply affected by it you might be the problem. And anyone who does try to articulate the pain is treated with suspicion, accused of having some political agenda, rather than just being overcome with this feeling. This feeling of absolute abandonment.

I'll note that for children of gay couples, the omertà is even stronger. In the present ideological climate, it's impossible to express sympathy for the difficulty of growing up without a mother or without a father. Saying so out loud risks detonating cultural and emotional explosives.

Fear of abandonment debilitates Gen Z in many ways. "Fear of abandonment explains much of Gen Z's lack of resilience" and overwrought concerns for safety. "If you fear abandonment, you won't risk romance. Words will feel traumatic." The snowflake phenomenon is to be expected. "How can we stand on our own two feet when the ground keeps crumbling beneath us?"

India urges cultural conservatives to avoid summary dismissals of young people as selfish and shallow—or mindlessly woke. "When young women rage against marriage and motherhood so viscerally what I'm really hearing is *it's not safe to marry*. It's not safe to have kids." Just look at what's going on in contemporary society. "Why would you risk that?" The parents of Gen-Z youth couldn't tough it out. "We simply don't believe anyone will stay."

The Gen-Z motive for downplaying marriage and championing nontraditional families does not rest in a sunny progressive confidence in the so-called arc of history. Only Baby Boomers can sustain that conceit. Instead, fear of abandonment encourages young people "to take family less seriously, to put less of ourselves into relationships, do it all half-heartedly so it hurts less in the end." Having children? It's not that Gen-Z women are brainwashed by radical feminists; they've been disabled by a culture long ago transformed by the sexual revolution. "We haven't lost sight of what's important, we were never shown what was important. And no wonder we don't want kids. We were kids when we got left."

The imperative of "self-care" is often emphasized as the solution for Gen-Z unhappiness. India sees this as a perverse response to abandonment. "There are young women whose families fell apart and who their whole lives dreamed of nothing but a stable, lasting love to depend on, and are now being told that's pathological, that's *needy*, they should love

themselves more . . . I see in so much of therapy culture young people desperate to be loved and trying to train themselves out of it.” Stop! Stop! Stop! “Please will someone step in and say to this generation that maybe they don’t need more self-love, more belief in themselves, but something to belong to.” I would add, something to serve and give themselves to.

India might have added reflections on the hypercompetitive, college-or-bust educational culture. Or the winner-take-all economic system. Or the dark horizon of war, about which Baby Boomer and Millennial political leaders seem so nonchalant. But she’s right to focus on matters of the heart—mom, dad, wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend. From time immemorial, the domestic hearth has offered comfort and consolation in an often cold, cruel world. We have deprived the rising generation of that comfort and consolation, in large part because our society has embraced the Rainbow Reich. India: “No amount of material progress has helped this generation so far. The fear is still there. It *does not matter* what comfort and convenience we have if we think love is dead.”

WHILE WE'RE AT IT

◆ For some commentators, it’s always 1939. The title of a recent essay in *The Atlantic* by Anne Appelbaum says it all: “Trump Is Speaking Like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.” Applebaum makes much of Trump’s penchant for hyperbolic slander: “radical-left thugs” who “live like vermin”; illegal immigrants who are “poisoning the blood of our country”; “sick people, radical-left lunatics.” No doubt these and other characterizations coarsen civic discourse. Unfortunately, Appelbaum and others ignore the fact that “fascist” is likewise a term of character assassination, and just as hyperbolic. Incontinent in their denunciations, which draw on the Manichean mythology of the twentieth century, they, too, increase the rancor in our society. Applebaum accuses Trump of “the cultivation of hatred.” She responds in kind.

◆ Anthony Trollope’s characterization in *Barchester Towers* of an Anglican divine, Francis Arabin: “a high churchman at all points; so high indeed that at one period of his career he had all but toppled over into the cesspool of Rome.”

◆ Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas: “Catholicism will be nihilism’s last competitor on the dance floor of history, and Catholicism will see it drop from exhaustion as the orchestra plays on. The music itself will testify.”

◆ Kamala Harris released a five-part Opportunity Agenda for Black Men. The fifth item promised to legalize marijuana. Apparently, her campaign wishes to increase opportunities for black men to be stupefied.

◆ Massimo Faggioli writing in *Commonweal*:

Francis doesn't seem to have been influenced by the synodal vision that he is advocating for when it comes to his own manner of exercising papal primacy. This has created a sort of journalistic ultramontanistism, augmented by Francis's direct and frequent interactions with the press, where the only voice that ends up mattering is his. This problem was especially apparent most recently on the in-flight press conference of September 13, when Francis addressed the upcoming presidential election and suggested a moral equivalence between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Whatever happens on November 5 and after, Catholic voices must find a way to speak again to the public—but maybe also to the pope.

◆ Krumme 13 is a group in Germany that lobbies for lowering the age of consent and legalizing child pornography. Don't imagine that this effort is doomed to fail. If progressives are eager to allow thirteen-year-olds to choose to take life-altering hormones and undergo sex-change surgery, it's hard to see why they shouldn't let them choose to have sex with whomever they want.

◆ Results of a survey conducted by the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University:

In 2022, slightly more than 36% of U.S. journalists say they identify with the Democrat Party, up about eight percentage points from 2013. The number of those who identified with the Republican party decreased about six percentage points to 3.4% during the same period. The number of journalists identifying as Independents increased by about two percentage points to 52% in 2022.

◆ Mass immigration continues to roil European politics, and mainstream parties are beginning to adjust. In October, the German center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union, called for the European Union to build and reinforce border fences separating EU member states from sources of asylum seekers such as Belarus and

Turkey. French interior minister Bruno Retailleau announced his support for a referendum on immigration, a measure long called for by Marine Le Pen's party, *Rassemblement National*. In my estimation, these are signs of sanity. Determined to remain in power, the center aims to usurp the political advantages of the right. Democracy in action.

◆ Seventeenth-century Anglican cleric Jeremy Taylor: "Men are apt to prefer prosperous error to an afflicted truth." In this matter, times have not changed.

◆ Writing in his *FIRST THINGS* "Synod Diary," Larry Chapp notes the striking over-representation of Jesuits at October's Synod on Synodality. Of the 310 clergy and religious who participated in official capacities, twenty-five are members of the Society of Jesus. And they played prominent roles. The special secretary to the Synod, Fr. Giacomo Costa, is a Jesuit, as is the relator general, Jean-Claude Cardinal Hollerich. Eight of the thirty-seven Synod facilitators are Jesuits. Jesuits are also over-represented among theological experts and observers. Chapp notes the irony:

Though the promoters of this Synod and of the synodality concept emphasize hearing a wide range of voices, it is striking how many of those voices come from a very particular location within the contemporary Church. We've been told repeatedly that the three-year-long synodal process has been a genuine exercise in listening to "the People of God" and, indeed, to the Holy Spirit. But it seems that the Spirit has made a preferential option for listening to Jesuit voices above all others, and that the Jesuits represent the People of God in a strikingly outsized way.

Instead of "going to the peripheries," as a slogan of this pontificate urges, we are asked to follow leading figures of the progressive Catholic establishment in the West. Chapp again: "In a global Church that is, indisputably, the most multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial, multilinguistic, and multinational institution on the planet, the claim that a Synod, dominated in its leadership positions by Jesuits from the global north, is representative of the world Church is *prima facie* implausible."

◆ The synod underway in Rome as I write is Seinfeldian, a synod about nothing. So argues Kevin Tierney in his Substack column, "Kevin's Substack." The Francis pontificate has encouraged open warfare among factions: progressives, conservatives, rad-trads, African eminences, American bishops, and so on. The effect has been incoherence and herky-jerky, stop-start measures such as *Fiducia Supplicans*, which

allowed (sort of) the blessing of same-sex couples, just as an earlier measure allowed (sort of) the reception of Communion by divorced and remarried Catholics. The give-then-take-away dance was repeated when Pope Francis removed all progressive ambitions from the synod's agenda, doing so after having promised that the synodal process would represent a new and transformative way of "doing church." In effect, everything cancels everything else. "This will result in an eventual apostolic exhortation that nobody will read, and even fewer will implement. We've come a long way from 'the culmination of the Second Vatican Council'"—the initial marketing of the synodal process—"to a discussion about nothing, leading to a document about nothing, to be read by nobody."

◆ Tierney is right. Yes, there will be uses of canonical power. The Vatican recently ordered an apostolic visitation of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, a traditionalist movement devoted to the Latin Mass. No doubt the visitation is being orchestrated by those who hope that Francis will suppress the society. But whatever the outcome, no minds will be changed. Latin Mass attendance will continue to increase, along with bitterness toward the arrogant and authoritarian Baby Boomers who preach "inclusion" while persecuting those who hold different views. Instead of uniting the Church, this pontificate has promoted its fragmentation. The Holy Spirit may be smiling. Catholicism seems to be heading toward a more federal structure, in spirit if not in law. Perhaps this development will be a fitting corrective to the undue "Romanization" of the Church after the pontificate of Pius IX.

◆ Simone Weil: "If children are accustomed to not thinking of God, they will become fascists or Communists out of a need to give themselves to something." Perhaps, but as Dan Mahoney observes in "Simone Weil's Conversion" (*Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2024), "listless nihilism" and "spiritual indifference" are also possibilities.

◆ We are racing to complete work on a new website. Our ambition is to provide readers with an online experience as delightful as our beautiful print edition. We're proud of what we publish. We want to be proud of the way in which we publish. The new website will have a few new features. Subscribers will be able to download a PDF of the new issues as they appear, allowing for leisurely reading on an iPad or laptop in places with spotty Wi-Fi coverage. (Regulars on Amtrak will appreciate this feature.)

The new website will also employ a comprehensive paywall. (At present, web-exclusive content is free to everyone at all times.) The experts we consulted counseled us to

maintain a tight paywall, permitting just one or two free articles before requiring a subscription. But increased subscription revenue is not our sole motive. We have a mission, and we want our content to be read by as many people as possible. The new website will impose limits on free content in the hope that devoted readers who are not subscribers will join our community of supporters. Our prices will remain low, lower than many Substack subscriptions and other online magazines.

As a rule, readers rarely like change. I'm among them. But as St. John Henry Newman observed: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." We won't be perfect, but our aim is to have a living publication—hence, our new website.

◆ I'm pleased to announce the launch of an annual FIRST THINGS lecture in Florida, named in honor of our founder, Richard John Neuhaus. Political philosopher Patrick Deneen will deliver the inaugural Neuhaus Lecture at New College of Florida on Thursday, February 13. Visit *firstthings.com* for details.