FIRST THINGS

Is Mormonism Christian?

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That is not the only interesting question, but it is probably the most important. Most non-Mormons have little occasion to think about Mormonism, and those who do tend toward distinctly negative thoughts. Although there is this curious thing of recent years that many conservative Christians warmly welcome Mormons as allies in various cultural tasks. To cite but one recent instance, it was an alliance of Catholics, evangelicals, and Mormons that was instrumental in persuading the people of Hawaii to reject same-sex marriage. Yet a few issues ago we published an article by a Mormon doctor presenting the case for Natural Family Planning and received blistering letters of protest. We thought that the fact that the argument was not being advanced by a Catholic might make it more persuasive to some. But at least some readers did not see it that way. Didn't we know that Mormons are the enemies of Christ and his Church? Such views are stronger in the Northwest and, increasingly, in the Southwest where the Mormon presence is a force to be reckoned with.

Ours is an interreligious enterprise, basically but not exclusively Jewish and Christian. Dr. Bruce Hafen is on our Editorial Advisory Board. He has held prominent positions in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), including that of provost and dean of the law school at Brigham Young University. I can't say that many of my friends are Mormons, but some are. We are obliged to respect human dignity across the board, and to affirm common discernments of the truth wherever we find them. Where we disagree we should try to put the best possible construction on the position of the other, while never trimming the truth. That will become more important as Mormons become more of a presence, both in this country and the world. There are about ten million of them now, with about
one-half of the membership in the U.S. Sociologist Rodney Stark—a non-Mormon with strong personal connections to the LDS—predicts that, on the basis of present growth patterns, there will be more than 265 million Mormons by the end of this century, making it the most important new religion in world history since Islam. For reasons I will come to, I think that is improbable. Put differently, if that happens, Mormonism will be something dramatically different from what it has been over the last century and a half.

Some while back we were sent for review the Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It’s a big five-volume set, written largely by professors at Brigham Young; we weren’t sure what to do with it, but I’ve been reading in it with great benefit. Then comes a big new book by Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, Mormon America: The Power and the Promise, published by HarperSanFrancisco (454 pages, $26). It is a remarkable piece of work and likely to be the best general introduction to Mormonism for years to come. The Ostlings are evangelical Protestants. Dick was for many years religion editor at Time and now covers religion for the Associated Press. I have had frequent occasion to say that he is one of the two or three best religion reporters in the country. Joan is a freelance writer with a background in the practice and teaching of journalism. What they have achieved with this assiduously researched and very readable book puts us all in their debt. Apparently the powers that be in Salt Lake City are ambivalent about the book, but it is probably as thorough and fair a treatment of the LDS by outsiders as they are likely to get.

Much to Admire

The Ostlings find much to admire. Mormonism gives a whole new meaning to being “pro-family.” In Mormon belief, families are, quite literally, forever. Proxies are baptized on behalf of the dead, and families and relatives hope to go on living together and procreating in a celestial eternity. All children are baptized at age eight, and at twelve boys (no girls allowed) take their place of responsibility and status by entering the first level of the priesthood—the priesthood, according to Joseph Smith, having been restored by John the Baptist in upstate New York in 1829. While bar mitzvah among Jews and confirmation among Christians too often means that young people graduate from their religious responsibilities, Mormon youth at that point in life graduate into intense and clearly defined responsibilities within the community. Also widely and justly admired is the LDS welfare system, whereby the community
take care of its own when they get into economic or other difficulty. At present, in a
time of economic prosperity, only about 5 percent require help from the welfare
system. (A figure, interestingly, about parallel with Edward Banfield's famous claim
about the percentage of people in any society who will never be able to make it on
their own.)

There is also no denying that the prohibition of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine has a
payoff. Mormons live, on average, eight to eleven years longer than other Americans,
and death rates from cancer and cardiovascular diseases are about half those of the
general population. Of course, it is fair to note, they do die of other things, and one
may do one's own calculation about the risk worth taking for a scotch before dinner
and a cigar afterward, never mind one's morning coffee. (The most recent Harvard
longitudinal study found that the strongest positive correlation between health and
habits is the daily consumption of about three ounces of wine or liquor. Go figure.) In
addition, a strong emphasis on chastity sharply reduces sexually transmitted
diseases, while a tightly knit and supportive community makes homicide and suicide
rare. Put it all together, and one concludes that Mormonism is good for your physical
health. Whether it is good for your spiritual health is a disputed question. (It should
also be noted that medical data on the strongly committed in other religious
communities are comparable to the Mormon findings.)

There are other things to admire. Brigham Young University, for instance, where,
because of church subsidies, young Mormons get the entire package (tuition, room,
board, etc.) for less than $10,000 a year. The ticket is slightly more for
non-Mormons, but there are very few takers. There is also the Church Educational
System, which involves hundreds of thousands in continuing education programs
here and around the world. Nor can the most severe critics deny the energy,
enthusiasm, and organization of the LDS in its missionary zeal, and in its dramatic
presentation of its colorful history, whether through the Mormon Tabernacle Choir
or annual pageants reenacting the key episodes of its sacred stories. In a world that
seems to be largely adrift, it is no little thing to be part of an organized crusade in
which you and those who are closest to you view your life as crucial to the unfolding
of the cosmic drama.

**Restoring the Church**

The LDS is, among other things, a very big business tightly controlled from the top
down. If one believes that the entire enterprise is based on revelation that is
authoritatively interpreted by divinely appointed officers, it makes sense that control should be from the top down. The LDS claims that God chose Joseph Smith to reestablish the Church of Jesus Christ after it had disappeared some 1,700 years earlier following the death of the first apostles. To complicate the picture somewhat, God’s biblical work was extended to the Americas somewhere around 2000 B.C. and continued here until A.D. 421. This is according to the Book of Mormon, the scriptures given to Joseph Smith on golden tablets by the Angel Moroni. American Indians are called Lamanites and are part of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Jesus came to preach to these Indians and for a long time there was a flourishing church here until it fell into apostasy, only to be restored, as the golden tablets foretold, by Joseph Smith. In addition to giving new scriptures, God commissioned Smith to revise the Bible, the text of which had been corrupted over the centuries by Jews and Christians.

Today's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is, allegedly, in direct succession to Smith, and the First Presidency claims powers that would have made St. Peter, never mind most of his successors, blush. The top leadership is composed, with few exceptions, of men experienced in business and with no formal training in theology or related disciplines. The President (who is also prophet, seer, and revelator) is the oldest apostle, which means he is sometimes very old indeed and far beyond his prime. Decisions are made in the tightest secrecy, inevitably giving rise to suspicions and conspiracy theories among outsiders and a substantial number of members.

Revenues from tithes, investments, and Mormon enterprises have built what the Ostlings say “might be the most efficient churchly money machine on earth.” They back up with carefully detailed research their “conservative” estimate that LDS assets are in the rage of $25-30 billion.

Protecting the Stories

But, of course, the most important control is over the sacred stories, and attendant truth claims, upon which the entire enterprise rests. Of the telling of history, Orwell wrote, “He who controls the past controls the future and he who controls the present controls the past.” The Ostlings devote a great deal of attention to “dissenters and exiles” who have tried to tell the sacred stories honestly, and in a manner that might
bring them into conversation with other stories of the world. Some may think the
Ostlings devote too much attention to these “troublemakers,” but I think not. In my
limited experience with, for instance, people associated with the publication
Sunstone, these are devout Mormons who are seized by the correct intuition that
truth that must be protected within the circle of true believers, that cannot
intelligently engage critical examination by outsiders, is in some fundamental sense
doubtfully true. Some of the “dissenters and exiles” may be dismissable as
troublemakers—a species all too familiar in other religious communities as well. I
expect, however, that what most of these people are trying to do is much more
important to the possible futures of the LDS than all the billions in assets, massive
building programs, and ambitiously organized missionary campaigns combined.

To give a credible account of the sacred stories and truth claims is no easy task. Not
to put too fine a point on it, the founding stories and doctrines of Mormonism appear
to the outsider as a bizarre phantasmagoria of fevered religious imagination not
untouched by perverse genius. Germinated in the “burnt-over district” of upstate
New York in the early nineteenth century, where new religions and spiritualities
produced a veritable rainforest of novel revelations, the claims of Joseph Smith
represent a particularly startling twist of the kaleidoscope of religious possibilities. In
1831, Alexander Campbell, cofounder of the Disciples of Christ, said that Smith
pasted together “every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the
last ten years.” Much of the teaching reflects the liberal Protestantism of the time,
even the Transcendental and Gnostic fevers that were in the air: e.g., a God in
process of becoming, progressive revelation, the denial of original sin, and an
unbridled optimism about the perfectibility of man. Mix that in with the discovery of
golden tablets written in a mysterious language, the bodily appearance of God the
Father and Son, angelic apparitions, and a liberal dose of Masonic ritual and jargon,
and the result is, quite simply, fantastic. The question, of course, is whether it is true.

In what sense true? It is true in the sense that it is meaningful for those who believe
it uncritically, and even for more critical souls who embrace the community whose
fabulous founding, they contend, points to higher truths. In the conventional version
controlled by LDS authorities, it is true if you believe it is true. Thus is the back door
shut against potentially subversive reason. One possible response is to say that all
religion is finally based on faith and is incapable of rational demonstration. Did not
St. Paul say that the gospel of Christ is “foolishness” according to the wisdom of the
world? Of course he did. But every part of the traditional Christian story has been
and is subjected to critical examination, by believers and nonbelievers alike—and
that examination, with its attending disagreements, will go on to the end of time.
Over two thousand years, from Origen and Augustine through Anselm, Aquinas, Newman, Barth, and Balthasar, the truth claims of Christianity have engaged, with utmost intensity and sophistication, alternative and opposing construals of reality. In short, there is a very long Christian intellectual tradition. There is not, or at least not until very recently, such a Mormon tradition. And those who are interested in encouraging such inquiry typically find themselves in the company of “dissenters and exiles.” Keep in mind, however, that Mormonism is not yet two centuries old. A youngish Mormon intellectual today is in relation of time to Joseph Smith roughly comparable to Origen in relation to the apostles.

But his task is ever so much more difficult than that of Irenaeus, Origen, and the many other early Christian thinkers. There is, for instance, the surpassingly awkward fact that not a single person, place, or event that is unique to the Book of Mormon has ever been proven to exist. Outside the fanum of true believers, these tales cannot help but appear to be the product of fantasy and fabrication. There is, moreover, a corrosive tradition of make-believe in the LDS, such as the claim that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham—a book he said was written by Abraham—from Egyptian papyri that were later proven to be nothing but conventional funerary inscriptions.

The sanitized story of Mormonism promoted by the LDS tries to hide so much that cannot be hidden. The Ostlings are to be commended for resisting sensationalism in relating the sensational history of polygamy in the LDS, including Joseph Smith's coercive use of threats of eternal damnation in order to procure young women he desired as additional wives. (On this score, the quasi-official Encyclopedia is also considerably more candid than the usual LDS presentations.) And how, except by a practiced schizophrenia, can LDS biblical scholars engage with other scholars if they are required to give credence to the normative status of Smith's “translation” (i.e., rewriting) of the King James Bible? There is a long list of particulars in the formidable obstacles to be overcome if anything like a credible intellectual tradition is to be secured, and not least among the obstacles is the history of LDS leadership in backstopping secretiveness with mendacity. Taking note of these realities is not to deny the frequent moral courage, indeed heroism, of the early leadership, or the continuing devotion and talent of their successors.

Missionary Zeal

The LDS is much given to boosterism, and it is no surprise that its leaders relish the
projections of almost exponential growth offered by such as Rodney Stark. Nobody can help but be impressed by the thousands of clean-cut Mormon young men who go on mission, two by two, knocking on the doors of the world, but the Ostlings helpfully put this missionary enterprise into perspective by comparing it with the many times larger enterprise of various Christian groups, noting as well that, unlike the Mormons, these missionaries do not limit themselves to winning converts but minister to the illiterate, the poor, and others in need. Moreover, these Christian efforts result in large and thriving indigenous churches that engage and transform local cultures, whereas the Mormon mission, totally controlled and directed from Salt Lake City, is about as pure an instance of American cultural imperialism as can be imagined, albeit a benevolently intended imperialism.

It appears also that the figures of Mormon growth are considerably inflated, not taking into account the massive defections through the back door, especially in developing countries. The Ostlings observe, “Mormonism succeeds by building on a preexisting Christian culture and by being seen as an add-on, drawing converts through a form of syncretism. Mormonism flourishes best in settings with some prior Christianization.” There is, in this view, a parasitic dynamic in Mormon growth. Yet the Ostlings suggest that, despite doctrinal and demographic problems, Mormonism may continue to thrive. “Ours is a relational era,” they write, “not a conceptual one. Members are more likely to be attracted by networking and community than by truth claims. The adherents appear to be contented or docile in their discontent, except for some thousands of intellectuals.” I am not so sure, and that brings us to the opening question of whether Mormonism is Christian or a new religion tenuously founded on fables and sustained by authoritarian management.

Maybe ours is a time in which truth does not matter that much in terms of institutional flourishing, a time in which communities can get along with useful, if not particularly noble, lies. But we should not too easily resign ourselves to that conclusion.

An Insulting Question

Asking whether Mormonism is Christian or Mormons are Christians (a slightly different question) is thought to be insulting. “How can you ask that,” protests a Mormon friend, “when we clearly love the Lord Jesus as much as we do?” It is true that St. Paul says that nobody can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). But that only indicates that aspects of Mormon faith are touched by the Holy Spirit, as is every element of truth no matter where it is found. A
Mormon academic declares that asking our question “is a bit like asking if African Americans are human.” No, it is not even a bit like that. “Christian” in this context is not honorific but descriptive. Nobody questions whether Mormons are human. To say that Jews, Muslims, or Buddhists are not Christians is no insult. It is a statement of fact, indeed of respect for their difference. The question is whether that is a fact and a difference that applies also to Mormonism.

The question as asked by Mormons is turned around: are non-Mormons who claim to be Christians in fact so? The emphatic and repeated answer of the Mormon scriptures and the official teaching of the LDS is that we are not. We are members of “the great and abominable church” that was built by frauds and impostors after the death of the first apostles. The true church and true Christianity simply went out of existence, except for its American Indian interlude, until it was rediscovered and reestablished by Joseph Smith in upstate New York, and its claims will be vindicated when Jesus returns, sooner rather than later, at a prophetically specified intersection in Jackson County, Missouri.

The Ostlings, in a manner common among evangelical Protestants, address the question of whether Mormons are Christians exclusively in terms of doctrine. Mormonism claims that God is an exalted man, not different in kind as Creator is different in kind from creature. The Mormon claim is, “What God was, we are. What God is, we will become.” Related to this is the teaching that the world was not created ex nihilo but organized into its present form, and that the trespass in the Garden of Eden, far from being the source of original sin, was a step toward becoming what God is. Further, Mormonism teaches that there is a plurality of gods. Mormons dislike the term “polytheism,” preferring “henotheism,” meaning that there is a head God who is worshiped as supreme. If Christian doctrine is summarized in, for instance, the Apostles’ Creed as understood by historic Christianity, official LDS teaching adds to the creed, deviates from it, or starkly opposes it almost article by article.

LDS teaching that believers are on the way to becoming gods has, of course, interesting connections with early church fathers and their teaching on “theosis” or “deification,” a teaching traditionally accented more in the Christianity of the East than of the West, but theologically affirmed by both. Some Mormon thinkers have picked up on those connections and have even recruited, not very convincingly, C. S. Lewis in support of LDS doctrine. (Lewis simply offers rhetorical riffs on classical Christian teaching and in no way suggests an ontological equivalence between Creator and creature.)
Christianity and the History of Christians

Beyond these doctrinal matters, as inestimably important as they are, one must ask what it means to be Christian if one rejects the two thousand year history of what in fact is Christianity. Christianity is inescapably doctrinal but it is more than doctrines. Were it only a set of doctrines, Christianity would have become another school of philosophy, much like other philosophical schools of the Greco-Roman world.

Christianity is the past and present reality of the society composed of the Christian people. As is said in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” That reality encompasses doctrine, ministry, liturgy, and a rule of life. Christians disagree about precisely where that Church is to be located historically and at present, but almost all agree that it is to be identified with the Great Tradition defined by the apostolic era through at least the first four ecumenical councils, and continuing in diverse forms to the present day. That is the Christianity that LDS teaching rejects and condemns as an abomination and fraud.

Yet Mormonism is inexplicable apart from Christianity and the peculiar permutations of Protestant Christianity in nineteenth-century America. It may in this sense be viewed as a Christian derivative. It might be called a Christian heresy, except heresy is typically a deviation within the story of the Great Tradition that Mormonism rejects tout court. Or Mormonism may be viewed as a Christian apostasy. Before his death in 1844, Joseph Smith was faced with many apostasies within the Mormon ranks, and since then there have been more than a hundred schisms among those who claim to be his true heirs. Still today LDS leaders quote Smith when censuring or excommunicating critics. For instance, this from Smith: “That man who rises up to condemn others, finding fault with the Church, saying that they are out of the way, while he himself is righteous, then know assuredly, that man is in the high road to apostasy.”

With respect to the real existing Christianity that is the Church, the words apply in spades to Joseph Smith. He knew, of course, that he was rejecting the Christianity of normative tradition, and he had an explanation. On the creation ex nihilo question, for instance, he declared only weeks before his death: “If you tell [critics] that God made the world out of something, they will call you a fool. But I am learned, and know more than all the world put together. The Holy Ghost does, anyhow; and he is within me, and comprehends more than all the world; and I will associate myself with him.” By definition, he could not be apostate because he spoke for God. It is an
answer, of sorts.

The history of Christianity, notably since the sixteenth-century Reformation, is littered with prophets and seers who have reestablished “the true church,” usually in opposition to the allegedly false church of Rome, and then, later, in opposition to their own previously true churches. There are many thousands of such Christian groups today. Most of them claim to represent the true interpretation of the Bible. A smaller number lay claim to additional revelations by which the biblical witness must be “corrected.” One thinks, for instance, of the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon. There are other similarities between Mormonism and the Unification Church, such as the emphasis on the celestial significance of marriage and family. According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “Gods and humans are the same species of being, but at different stages of development in a divine continuum, and the heavenly Father and Mother are the heavenly pattern, model, and example of what mortals can become through obedience to the gospel.”

**Another Religion**

Some have suggested that the LDS is a Christian derivative much as Christianity is a Jewish derivative, but that is surely wrong. The claim of Christianity is that its gospel of Jesus Christ is in thorough continuity with the Old Testament and historic Israel, that the Church is the New Israel, which means that it is the fulfillment of the promise that Israel would be “a light to the nations.” The Church condemned Marcion’s rejection of the Old Testament, and she never presumed to rewrite or correct the Hebrew Scriptures on the basis of a new revelation. On the contrary, she insisted that the entirety of the old covenant bears witness to the new. While it is a Christian derivative, the LDS is, by way of sharpest contrast, in radical discontinuity with historic Christianity. The sacred stories and official teachings of the LDS could hardly be clearer about that. For missionary and public relations purposes, the LDS may present Mormonism as an “add-on,” a kind of Christianity-plus, but that is not the official narrative and doctrine.

A closer parallel might be with Islam. Islam is a derivative of Judaism and Christianity. Like Joseph Smith, Muhammad in the seventh century claimed new revelations and produced in the Qur’an a “corrected” version of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, presumably by divine dictation. Few dispute that Islam is a new and another religion, and Muslims do not claim to be Christian, although they profess a deep devotion to Jesus. Like Joseph Smith and his followers, they do claim
to be the true children of Abraham. Christians in dialogue with Islam understand it
to be an interreligious, not an ecumenical, dialogue. Ecumenical dialogue is dialogue
between Christians. Dialogue with Mormons who represent official LDS teaching is
interreligious dialogue.

One must again keep in mind that Mormonism is still very young. It is only now
beginning to develop an intellectually serious theological tradition. Over the next
century and more, those who are now the “dissidents and exiles” may become the
leaders in forging, despite the formidable obstacles, a rapprochement with historic
Christianity, at which point the dialogue could become ecumenical. As noted earlier,
there is the interesting phenomenon of Mormon thinkers appealing to the Christian
tradition, from Irenaeus through C. S. Lewis, in support of aspects of their doctrine.

And there is the poignant and persistent insistence of Mormons, “We really are
Christians!” Sometimes that claim means that they really are Christians and the rest
of us are not. Increasingly, at least among some Mormons, the claim is that they are
Christians in substantively the same way that others are Christians.

It is a claim we should question but not scorn. Such a claim contains, just possibly,
the seed of promise that over time, probably a very long time, there could be within
Mormonism a development of doctrine that would make it recognizable as a peculiar
but definite Christian communion. Such attempted development, however, could
produce a major schism between Mormons who are determined to be Christian, on
the one hand, and the new religion taught by the LDS on the other.

Meanwhile, Mormonism and the impressive empire of the LDS will likely be with us
for a long time. They are no longer an exotic minority that is, by virtue of minority
status, exempt from critical examination and challenge. Such examination and
challenge, always fair-minded and sympathetic, is exemplified by the Ostlings' very
helpful book, Mormon America. I am skeptical about the more dramatic projections
of Mormon growth in the future. That depends in part on the degree to which the
Ostlings are right in thinking our era is “relational” rather than “conceptual.” It
depends in larger part on developments internal to the LDS and transformations in
its self-understanding and self-presentation to the world. The leadership of the LDS
will have to decide whether its growth potential is enhanced or hampered by
presenting Mormonism as a new religion or as, so to speak, another Christian
denomination. Sometimes they seem to want to have it both ways, but that will
become increasingly difficult. And, of course, for Mormons whose controlling
concern is spiritual, intellectual, and moral integrity, questions of marketing and
growth, as well as questions of institutional vitality and communal belonging, must
be clearly subordinated to the question of truth.

As for the rest of us, we owe to Mormon Americans respect for their human dignity, protection of their religious freedom, readiness for friendship, openness to honest dialogue, and an eagerness to join hands in social and cultural tasks that advance the common good. That, perhaps, is work enough, at least for the time being.

**Are You Mentally Disordered?**

The Surgeon General’s report on mental illness has been the object of so much criticism and even derision that perhaps we should just let it die a merciful death. But it seems to me there are at least a couple of aspects that have not received the attention they deserve. The gist of the report, you may remember, is that “one in every five Americans experiences a mental disorder in any given year, and half of all Americans have such disorders at some time in their lives.” The purpose of the report, enthusiastically backed by the mental health industry, is that, through insurance and other means, billions of additional dollars should be spent on therapy.

As anyone knows who has had to cope with it in families and friends, mental disorder can be a dreadfully serious business. When mental disorder is handled as it is by this report, however, the subject is trivialized and politicized in a way that invites dismissiveness. The intention to launch another campaign of political correctness is underscored by the frequent comparisons with the 1964 Surgeon General’s report on smoking. I recall another front page story in the *New York Times* about twenty years ago when the psychological establishment issued a report claiming that something like 30 percent of the population of New York City, and 45 percent of people in Manhattan, were mentally disordered. Based upon my experience in New York, I thought the figures much too low.

So it is also with the new nationwide statistic of one in five. I should think that, given the definition of disorder, the figure is at least four in five. The report defines disorders as “alterations in thinking, mood, or behavior that cause distress or impair a person’s ability to function.” They include “depression, attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorder, and phobias.” Surely most people experience something along
those lines at least once a year. I know that I do. There are days when I am so
depressed and out of sorts with the world that I can't get a thing done; there are
other days when I suffer from the delusion that I've more or less figured out the
mystery of life and can't wait to proclaim my discovery from the housetops. I don't
know which is the greater disorder.

I am, like the Mikado, making up a little list of people in need of mental treatment.
The task is greatly facilitated by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the
American Psychiatric Association, which lists more than three hundred kinds of
mental illness. A criterion of Antisocial Personality Disorder is “impulsivity or failure
to plan ahead.” Gotcha. Especially if you suffer from an impulse to spell
impulsiveness “impulsivity.” Another criterion is “irritability and aggressiveness.” I
apologize. Histrionic Personality Disorder is something else. Such people want to be
“the center of attention.” Check out your five-year-old. Another sign: “Considers
relationships to be more intimate than they really are.” Ah, Alice. She broke my heart
in high school. And just about every adolescent I have known, certainly including
myself, is certifiable by the criteria of what is called Oppositional Defiant Disorder:
“1) Often loses temper. 2) Argues with adults. 3) Deliberately annoys people. 4) Is
touchy or easily annoyed by others.” And so forth. Of special interest is Obsessive
Compulsive Personality Disorder: “Is over-conscientious, scrupulous, and inflexible
about matters of morality, ethics, or values (not accounted for by cultural or religious
identification).” I love the parenthesis that gives some of us an out. Presumably, if
we're over-conscientious, scrupulous, etc., we religious types are excused from
treatment. The prescription is to get a new culture or religion. Finally, if you deny
that you are suffering from a mental disorder, you should know that that is a
symptom of a disorder known as Non-Compliance with Treatment. It is an additional
sign of disorder if you resent, refuse to pay, or pay late your bills for treatment. One
has to admire the DSM for the way it ties up all the strings on the therapeutic
package.

Inducing Anxiety

The Surgeon General's report takes Philip Rieff's argument about “the therapeutic
society” to the point of absurdity, it being assumed that “health” is an unremitting
sense of well-being and optimal functioning. Those issuing the report do not seem to
catch the irony that its purpose is to induce a sense of distress and anxiety about
both the mental health of the American people and the state of health care. And, of
course, religion is, at least by implication, indicted by the report since a message
such as “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!” is certainly aimed at inducing acute anxiety about one's way of life and even, pushing the acute to the ultimate, one's eternal salvation. In the biblical scheme of things, we live in a world radically disordered by sin. Deep anxiety about this unhappy state of affairs is the mark of a person on the way to spiritual and mental health.

The report's efforts at “scientification” are not without their amusing aspects. For instance, we are told that, among Americans age eighteen to fifty-four, 14.9 percent experience anxiety disorders and 7.1 percent experience mood disorders at least once a year. Now, even if we could agree on a plausible definition of such disorders, how could one possibly determine what percentage of a hundred million people have such experiences? Think about it. The report candidly admits that “for the most part, the causes [of mental disorders] remain unknown,” although, turning philosophical, it declares that “the split between mind and body” proposed by Descartes in the seventeenth century “is artificial and antiquated, and has hampered mental health research.” The discussion of causes concludes with this: “The roots of most mental disorders lie in some combination of biological and environmental factors.” In other words, your problem is either inside you or in the world around you. Science marches on.

A big part of the report is devoted to advancing, once again, the proposition that “mental disorders are not character flaws, but are legitimate illnesses that respond to specific treatments.” One may be allowed to wonder why, if a disorder is “legitimate,” it is a disorder at all. Why does something that is legitimate require treatment? But, of course, the purpose of the report is to sell treatment, and toward that end to reduce embarrassment about purchasing it. We are told that the “cruel and unfair stigma attached to mental illness” is “inexcusably outmoded” and must no longer be tolerated. “Why,” the report asks, “is the stigma so strong despite better public understanding of mental illness?” “The answer appears to be fear of violence. People with mental illness, especially those with psychosis, are perceived to be more violent than in the past.” In fact, says the report, “there is very little risk of violence or harm to a stranger from casual contact with an individual who has a mental disorder.” Most people who fear violence, one may reasonably conjecture, are not afraid of casual contact with strangers but of intimate contact with, for instance, abusive husbands, wives, or parents.

The reason for the “stigma” surrounding mental illness is, I dare to suggest, not usually related to violence at all. Aunt Martha puts salt in her cooking where the recipe calls for sugar because she believes that the Trilateral Commission has
falsified all the cookbooks. In this respect, as in others, Aunt Martha is just a little—if I may still be permitted the term—crazy. I don't know if that's a “character flaw,” but it's an important thing to know about Aunt Martha. I mean simply that it's something to take into account when dealing with Aunt Martha, especially if she invites you to dinner. Similarly, the parishioner who after Mass insists that I shake hands with his wife, although she died four years ago, is not the least bit violent. He is very strange in a perfectly harmless, indeed rather endearing, way.

Because I am not prepared to declare that they are all mentally disordered, I refuse to believe that the people in the psychotherapeutic establishment really believe what they say about the “stigma” of mental illness. If, God forbid, the Surgeon General breaks his leg or comes down with prostate cancer, there is certainly no stigma attached to that. If, however, he and others responsible for this report suffer from anxiety disorders and dissociative thinking that results in logical incoherence, it may tend to discredit their arguments. I don't know how one gets around the suggestion that there is something like a stigma connected to such disorders, and that they may even reflect a character flaw. Whether there is an effective treatment is quite another matter.

Again, mental illness is a very serious subject deserving of very serious attention. But as one of the one in five who is defined as suffering from a mental disorder for which the report is peddling treatment, I hope the Surgeon General will not be offended if I say that I'm not buying. What I might do this evening is stop by the video store and check out Jimmy Stewart's *Harvey*. Better yet, there is that new volume in the *Collected Works* of G. K. Chesterton.

**An Artful Defense**

“An Artful Defense” is the title of John O'Sullivan's column in Canada's *National Post*. He tells me that he wrote it tongue in cheek, but I don't know why. It just might work. Herewith, by permission, O'Sullivan's lawyerly argument.

Sometime soon, Dennis Heiner will appear in a New York court accused of
defacing a portrait of the Virgin Mary that the artist himself, Chris Ofili, had already covered in elephant dung and pornographic cut-outs. If Mr. Heiner defends himself cleverly, his trial could be the trial of the century—an arts version of the famous Scopes “monkey” trial in Tennessee. But how can he possibly do that? Was not artist Chris Ofili’s Virgin Mary the object of veneration by art critics, by the crowds attending the “Sensation” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and even by clergypersons themselves? The Reverend Barbara Hussan, an Episcopal priestess, told the New York Post she had no objection to the original painting: “Is it offensive? No. I could quibble with the genitalia, but only because it doesn’t work artistically. But it’s much prettier than I expected. It’s quite beautiful.”

While the Episcopal Church mainly exists these days to make satire redundant, the Rev. Barbara's distinction is significant. Her sole objection (a mild one) to surrounding the Virgin Mary with pornographic cut-outs is that they don’t work “artistically.” Holiness now attaches to works of art rather than to religious practices, sacrilege is an artistic rather than a religious concept, and the Rev. Barbara is a priestess in the Religion of Art. (She’ll have to get in line.)

That, surely, points the way for Mr. Heiner's defense. He should maintain that his painting of white stripes on the defaced Virgin Mary was itself a work of art. After all, by virtually every test that the defenders of the “Sensation” exhibition lay down in such matters, defacing a portrait—even an undefaced one—counts as a work of art. Indeed, Marcel Duchamp's Mona Lisa in 1919—almost the first such work in this anti-art tradition—consisted of a mustache painted by Duchamp on a copy of the painting.

Let us, however, check Mr. Heiner's work against the art world's criteria: Art is subjective—it is whatever the artist says it is. In recent years we have seen a pile of bricks, a cow cut in half, piles of human ordure, and many other minor outrages presented by the artists as works of art and timidly accepted by the viewing public as such. All were exhibited by respectable galleries and all reviewed, generally respectfully, by the art critics. A favorite for this year's “prestigious” Turner Prize in London is the unmade bed, complete with stains and used Kleenex, that the artist lived in while having some kind of suicidal breakdown. Both Mr. Heiner's actions and the final object they produced are works of art squarely in this
tradition. And if he says it's art, who is to gainsay him? Maybe someone should enter him for the Turner Prize competition?

**Art is transgressive—meant to outrage and disturb.** Here Mr. Heiner has succeeded beyond the dreams of most artists. Not only has he transgressed the law itself—when even the bolder spirits in Bohemia studiously avoid a night in the cells—but the entire conventional art establishment is in a perfect rage at his actions. For he has revealed that the modernist tradition in painting now exhibits the inert imagination and frozen predictability that Duchamp (wrongly) attributed to the established artists of his day. It is all trivial gestures of revolutionary defiance to loud corporate applause. Chris Ofili—a Duchamp at the end of this particular artistic tether—could paint a mustache on the Virgin Mary, so to speak, but after sawn-off cows, unmade beds, and piles of ordure, he could hardly hope to shock anyone by doing so. By whitening the mustache, however, Dennis Heiner has thrown Bohemia into a complete tizzy.

**Great Art is never recognized in its own day.** Surely the final proof of Mr. Heiner's genius is that he will shortly appear in court—the philistine's ultimate response to true art. No one, it seems, has recognized the revolutionary force of his artistic gesture. Like that theatrical moment in Yasmin Reza's play, *Art*, in which a proto-Heiner transforms an almost plain white painting, qualified only by semi-visible downward-sloping diagonal lines, from a dull, conventional work of modern art into a clever cartoon by drawing a skier racing down the lines, Mr. Heiner has turned the world right side up. With a few simple bold strokes of white paint, he has defaced a ruin, desecrated the sacrilegious, and deconstructed a slum.

Is Art a crime, Your Honor? The defense rests.

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**Incorriginbly Christian America II**

Last month we took up the subject of how America is incorrigibly “Christian America,” and what we should make of that fact. In one of his
earlier books, *Unsecular Man*, sociologist Andrew Greeley did an imaginative historical reconstruction of on-the-ground Christian belief and practice in thirteenth-century Europe, the so-called “age of faith.” He makes a plausible case that practice was at least as lax and belief at least as confused as is the case today. He goes so far as to suggest that, by comparison, ours might more aptly be called the age of faith. One of the most ambitious studies of religion in America done in recent years was directed by Seymour Lachman and Barry Kasmin of City University of New York (*One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*). Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with more than 113,000 adults, and one of their more remarkable findings is that almost nobody described their religion as “New Age.” Projecting from the study, they estimate that there are probably fewer than twenty thousand “New Agers” in the entire American population. This met with incredulity from some commentators. You have only to go to the big bookstore at your local mall to find what seems to be miles upon miles of books and tapes and videos in the categories of “religion” and “spirituality” that fit the general description of New Age. If almost nobody is “into” New Age, who is buying those millions of books?

I expect the answer is obvious, and it has to do with the ways in which America is confusedly Christian. In perfectly good faith, people tell the interviewers that they are Methodist or Baptist or Roman Catholic or Lutheran, sensing no inconsistency with their interest in the esoteric or occult doctrines of New Age spiritualities. The Missouri Synod Lutheran who on Sunday morning listens approvingly to the pastor’s unequivocal insistence that there is no salvation apart from “justification by faith” is during the week finding reincarnation “very meaningful” and declares that the teaching of a quasi-Hindu master on the nonreality of reality is pretty much the same thing as Jesus taught. Students of contemporary society speak of the “cognitive dissonance” by which people live within, and shuttle back and forth between, two incompatible worldviews, the one religious and the other thoroughly secular. There is also cognitive dissonance within the religious worlds of Christianity. The discomfort of that dissonance is ameliorated by paying slight attention to the cognitive. Religion is understood as that which “meets my needs,” and for many people, if not most, clear thinking is not high on their list of felt needs.

To say that something or someone is “incorrigible” is usually not a
compliment. It suggests that they are not capable of amendment, that they are unruly or out of control. In saying that America is incorrigibly Christian, I intend to suggest precisely that. I certainly do not mean that everything that goes under the label of Christianity is *authentically* Christian. What constitutes authentic or orthodox Christianity is, of course, a much controverted subject, and has been from the beginning. Fundamentalists and evangelicals have a habit, irritating to many who are not fundamentalists or evangelicals, of saying that someone is a Christian or became a Christian on a specific date, meaning the person had a prescribed conversion experience and holds to certain tenets considered essential to authentic Christianity. A recent book written by an evangelical opines that, while only God knows for sure, it is reasonable to think that less than 10 percent of Americans are Christians. An evangelical missionary magazine offers a profile of Poland and insouciantly declares, “Christians are a small minority, probably no more than fifty thousand. The rest of the population is Roman Catholic.”

*A Catholic (and catholic) Sensibility*

The Catholic Church, too, has a very definite position on what constitutes orthodox Christianity, a position for which it claims the authority of two thousand years of doctrine institutionalized in the Magisterium, or teaching office, of the Church. There are more than a billion Catholics in the world—a little over half of the total Christian population—and they are often related to that teaching authority in a manner that might generously be described as flexible. Most of them have never read a papal encyclical and may be only vaguely aware of the doctrines expounded in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but they are sure that they are Catholic Christians. Sometimes, especially in Latin America, which is the most densely Catholic region of the world, flexibility reaches a level of promiscuity that is aptly called syncretism, meaning a hodgepodge mix of Christianity with beliefs and practices that the Church would hardly recognize as authentically Christian. When I was in Cuba for the Pope's pastoral visit, there was an ecumenical meeting with various religious groups, and the priests of the Santeria cult complained that they were not invited. Santeria is a curious mix of Catholicism and African religions, in which Catholic saints are identified with various nature gods and goddesses. When asked why the Santeria leaders were not invited, the
Cardinal of Havana seemed surprised by the question. The answer was obvious. “They are baptized Catholics. You don’t invite Catholics to an ecumenical meeting.”

The present discussion of incorrigibly Christian America reflects something of that catholic (upper case or lower case) sensibility. It is a generously flexible disposition toward beliefs and practices that somehow derive from or gravitate toward what we might recognize as authentic Christianity. We are inclined to view Santeria and similar religious expressions as impossibly “primitive,” but it may be that Christianity in this most advanced society of ours is, at least to a significant extent, a kind of American Santeria. Some sociologists of religion have also referred to American Shinto, meaning a culturally pervasive but doctrinally indeterminate religiosity similar to Shintoism in Japan. The catholic sensibility on this score was well expressed in the nineteenth century by John Henry Newman:

Now, the phenomenon, admitted on all hands, is this: that a great portion of what is generally received as Christian truth is in its rudiments or in its separate parts to be found in heathen philosophies and religions. For instance, the doctrine of a Trinity is found both in the East and in the West; so is the ceremony of washing; so is the rite of sacrifice. The doctrine of the Divine Word is Platonic; the doctrine of the Incarnation is Indian; of a divine kingdom is Judaic; of angels and demons is Magian; the connection of sin with the body is Gnostic; celibacy is known to Bonze and Talapoin; a sacerdotal order is Egyptian; the idea of a new birth is Chinese and Eleusinian; belief in sacramental virtue is Pythagorean; and honors to the dead are a polytheism. Such is the general nature of the fact before us; [our opponents] argue from it—“These things are in heathenism, therefore they are not Christian”: we, on the contrary, prefer to say, “These things are in Christianity, therefore they are not heathen.”
Suffusing Everything

Our social and cultural understanding of “Christian America” should be marked by a similar sensibility. If our interest is in our soul’s salvation or to discover the ultimate truth, we cannot be too attentive to what is authentically Christian. But for the purposes at hand there are few purity tests; Christianity is understood as a flexible, fluid, and protean reality. Almost all of social reality flows into it, through it, out of it, and back into it again. That is in the nature of religion, and not only of religion. Social science speaks of the “religion factor,” and, in attempting to explain why people do what they do and think what they think, we try to isolate what is called the “religion variable,” which is perfectly understandable, but we should not take such terminology too literally. It is somewhat like speaking of the “erotic factor” or of the “economic factor” in human life. The erotic and economic penetrate and suffuse almost everything.

The territorial ambitions of academic disciplines tempt writers to try to encompass everything within their specialty. In economics, “rational choice” theorists would explain everything, including religion and the erotic, in terms of economic exchange. Thus, for instance, a recent article in an academic journal on whether the decision of Jesus to embark on the course that got him crucified stands up to cost-benefit analysis. In this view, everything is economics. Those whose specialty is religion are subject to the same temptation, and end up declaring that everything is religion—or, in a dominantly Christian society, that everything is Christianity. A “functional” definition of religion equates religion with an operative belief system, and writers then go on to demonstrate that all action entails belief derived from a belief system, and therefore all action is religious. The result is a tautology that serves no useful function at all.

Resisting the Obvious

In speaking of the incorrigibility of “Christian America,” we should try to avoid such pitfalls. The Christian factor cannot be controlled or even tracked with any degree of precision. Certain explicitly Christian statements, actions, and institutions can be pinpointed, but Christianity is pervasive and variable. A simple analogy may be useful. I notice that items of software I have purchased for my personal computer carry a notice that
they are “leased” or “licensed” to me. Apple or Microsoft are putting me on notice that I do not own these programs; they are just selling me permission to use them. But of course this is largely a fiction. There are millions of pieces of software out there being used in ways over which the manufacturer has no control. They can be manipulated, combined, and recombined with results that bear little resemblance to what was originally purchased. No analogy is perfect, but it is something like that with Christianity in America. We should not lose sight of the fact, however, that nine out of ten users still claim that their moral and spiritual software is Christianity. At the risk of pushing the analogy too far, one notes that most of them regularly go to churches where, so to speak, they have the manufacturer re-authenticate the programs they are using. And, of course, in America there are enough manufacturers of the product called Christianity that almost anything can get certified as authentic.

**While We're At It**

• Ash Wednesday again. With the ashes the cross is traced on our foreheads. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” A solemn little ritual, and each year I am astonished by the eagerness with which the multitudes turn out for it. I really don't understand why; it is so totally counter to the fatuously upbeat spiritualities of the culture. That's probably why. But then the solemnity is countered by church music for which somebody should do penance in this penitential season. Somebody named Tom Conry is responsible for this bit of doggerel, set to a tune of Broadway kitsch and peddled by New Dawn Music:

   *We rise again from ashes, from the good we've failed to do.*
   *We rise again from ashes, to create ourselves anew.*
   *If all our world is ashes, then must our lives be true,*
an offering of ashes, an offering to you.

Do we rise from ashes or bow to the ashes that signify our mortality? If all the world is ashes, how can our lives, which are undoubtedly part of the world, be true? And, most important, if we can create ourselves anew, doesn’t that make the cross superfluous? I expect I’ll be accused of nit-picking again, but it does seem a pity to let heretical triteness detract from the solemnity of the moment that is Ash Wednesday.

- When the report was published in 1987, it threw the Canadian political class into a tizzy. The House of Commons issued a report, *The War Against Women*, and then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney commissioned a $10 million inquiry into what must most urgently be done. Published in the *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, the report was based on survey research that showed an awful lot of men beating up on women. What was not said, according to the *National Post*, is that the same research showed that women beat up on men at an equal rate, with women saying that, in the case of more severe conflicts, they started it two-thirds of the time. But the best part of the story is the sangfroid in the explanation of why only one side of the research was published earlier: “The researchers, Leslie Kennedy and Donald Dutton, say they were primarily interested in male-to-female violence at the time.” But of course.

- I see the Jesuits and St. Andrew’s Parish of Portland, Oregon, have opened a new kind of school for students in grades six through eight. It says here that “Nativity School will operate year round. The school day will begin early and end with a study hall from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. after a break for family time.” Year round from breakfast to bedtime? One cannot help but wonder where the family comes into the picture. Many schools have a period called homeroom. Nativity, it seems, will have a period for home, period. Let’s hope the break for family time is “quality time,” as it is said in this nation of broken families.

- An alert reader came across the website of the Ultramundane weekly, the *National Catholic Reporter*. He thought its mission statement might be of interest. It includes this: “The National Catholic Reporter Publishing
Company attempts to cooperate with God's grace in history. We work out of the Roman Catholic tradition.” The “attempts” is commendably modest. On the second score, the achievement of NCR is undeniable.

• In these pages, as elsewhere, Francis Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* has received deserved attention. Reviewing the book in the *Public Interest*, James Q. Wilson says he agrees with Fukuyama's hopeful contention that human nature itself will recoil against cultural meltdown and, sooner or later, begin to rebuild the “social capital” essential to a reasonably ordered life. Wilson does not buy, however, Fukuyama's claim that the disruption began in the sixties and was primarily driven by a change in sex roles and the economic transition to an “information society.” Fukuyama is aware of the cultural explanation of the great disruption, but he thinks culture changes too slowly to account for what has happened. Wilson disagrees. “The reason culture can change quickly is that much of it is produced by social elites who are easily drawn to new ideas and adventuresome practices. In England and America, changes had begun around the turn of the century and had come into full flower by the end of the First World War. The Bloomsbury set had replaced Queen Victoria, resistance to war had replaced habitual patriotism, and writers argued that crime was the result of social injustice rather than a weak human nature. By the 1940s, artists and musicians had taken up heroin, just as in the 1960s they took up marijuana and in the 1970s and 1980s they took up cocaine. At first, ordinary people continued in their customary cultural patterns. They flirted with sexual expression and personal liberation in the 1920s, but soon the Great Depression and the Second World War put an end to those adventures. Those two decades—the 1930s and the 1940s—could be called the Great Timeout: a two-decade interruption in the process of self-liberation. But when the war ended, and as the children of the Baby Boom reached adolescence, self-liberation returned with a vengeance and the Great Disruption was born. This produced many good things—for example, a concern for civil rights—but many bad ones, too. The tragedy for ordinary people, as Myron Magnet has pointed out in *The Dream and the Nightmare*, is that they often lack the resources with which to fight back against decadence. The rich can afford psychotherapy and drug treatment programs; the poor cannot. The rich can use gates and guards to protect their homes; the poor cannot. The rich can send their children to good private schools; the poor cannot. And so social elites can more readily
cope with the defects of contemporary society while the poor, and much of
the middle class, must await the slow reemergence of a more virtuous
culture.”

• Of course we think every article we publish is worthy or we wouldn’t
publish it. But I do have my favorites, and high on the list is “How the
World Lost Its Story” (October 1993) by Lutheran theologian Robert
Jenson. (See his updating, “Can We Have a Story?”, in this issue.)
Protestantism, he wrote, is the form that Christianity took under the
conditions of modernity, and the hyper-modernity that is called
postmodernity makes clear that Protestantism's “time is past.” That
perhaps puts it too bluntly; for the nuances you might want to go back to
the article itself. In any event, Jenson wrote: “Modern Christianity, i.e.,
Protestantism, has regularly substituted slogans for narrative, both in
teaching and in liturgy. It has supposed that hearers already knew they had
a story and even already knew its basic plot, so that all that needed to be
done was to point up certain features of the story—that it is ‘justifying,’ or
‘liberating,’ or whatever. The supposition was always misguided, but
sometimes the Church got away with it. In the postmodern world, this sort
of preaching and teaching and liturgical composition merely expresses the
desperation of those who in their meaningless world can believe nothing
but vaguely wish they could.” I was reminded of the Jenson article when an
alert reader sent me a brochure handed out at Grace Cathedral (Episcopal)
in San Francisco, signed by Bishop William E. Swing. The bishop writes:
“You know from the past about inquisitions and crusades and witch-hunts.
You live in a time of religious military zealots, abortion-clinic bombings,
and TV evangelists attempting to take power in our land.” He goes on to
assure the visitor that Grace Cathedral is “a place of religious immunity”
from such horrors. “An answer is Grace Cathedral. Here operates an
unconditional surrender to the freedom of God to speak to whomever in
whatever language is understandable. In this space you can walk the
labyrinth of life to the tune of the Spirit which you uniquely hear.
Immunity from religious control is granted you upon entry. Grace offers
‘sanctuary’ to everyone and premises this glorious freedom of God as the
climate to explore the healthiest living that religion affords.” The distance
from “the faith once delivered to the saints” to walking to “the tune of the
Spirit which you uniquely hear” neatly sums up the religious deformation
so astutely analyzed by Robert Jenson.
• A bright young twenty-something approaches me with an envelope in hand and announces, “They're baaack!” The envelope contains an invitation to an “International Interactive Worldwide Forum on the Content of Education in a Global Civilization” to be held in Lucknow, India. The theme of the meeting is, I kid you not, “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child.” This is sponsored by the State of the World Forum, which lists on its board luminaries such as Jean-Bertrand Aristide, former President of Haiti, James Baker, former U.S. Secretary of State, Mikhail Gorbachev, former everything, and Ted Turner of Turner Inc. The bash is cosponsored by, among others, the World Citizen Foundation, the Institute for Global Ethics, the Communitarian Network, and the Global Dialogue Institute. Participants will interactively take up questions such as “Is there a need for a new definition of education?” and “What are the universal values and global principles in education?” A sidetrip to the Taj Mahal is on offer. No, my young friend, they're not back. But they are still hanging around. On the other hand, such an international gathering in India costs big dollars. Celebrating the future of liberal progressivism's past is a luxury requiring nostalgists with deep pockets.

• Few people have done so much to advance Jewish-Christian relations over the years as Franciscan Father David-Maria Jaeger, who serves on the Holy See's working commission with the State of Israel. In a recent interview he had some candid words about realities that threaten to undermine the enormous progress that has been made in the dialogue. “I have the impression that, for some decades now, some of our Jewish friends who are carrying forward the dialogue have taken a prosecutorial attitude, basically pointing out the faults in the behavior of Catholics toward Jews over the centuries and demanding rectification. This might have been justifiable, indeed necessary and salutary, at some point in the past in order to awaken the conscience of the Christian world to a reconsideration of the attitude toward the Jews. And, indeed, that approach did bear a lot of fruit. It did awaken powerfully the conscience of the Christian world. It played an enormously important role in bringing the dialogue to where it is, to what it has achieved. But this prosecutorial approach, whatever its merits in the past, has run its course. It has reached what economists call ‘the point of diminishing returns.’ Instead of awakening consciences, it is dulling them. Instead of helping to jolt us into progress, it is threatening to undo the achievements that have already been made. I have pleaded—I have begged, emotionally—my friends on the
Jewish side to desist, to rethink their approach, because the continuation of these aggressive prosecutorial behaviors and statements are really creating a tremendous amount of resentment, mostly among those who have been most committed to the Jewish-Catholic dialogue.” On the agitated question of what Pius XII did or did not do during World War II, Fr. Jaeger says that debate among historians is both legitimate and necessary, but: “What is absolutely not legitimate, what is an extremely grave offense to the world's one thousand million Catholics and an extremely grave offense to the Holy See and to the revered memory of a great pontiff, is to accuse or to imply that whatever he had done or not done was motivated by a sympathy with the aims of the persecutors of the Jews or a sharing of their anti-Jewish prejudices or anything of this sort. This simply is not admissible.” Asked whether current frustrations suggest that the dialogue should be put on hold, Fr. Jaeger responded, “We cannot put a relationship on hold. Our relationship with the Jewish people is a reality of brotherhood, friendship, love, and solidarity. It can't be put on hold. I would [decry] any thought of that. It's not a business negotiation; it's a theological and historical reality.” But neither, says Fr. Jaeger, should the dialogue simply continue on its present course: “But certainly I think our Jewish friends who are most active in this dialogue are called upon to reexamine their approaches in the hope that they may heed my appeal, which is a heartfelt appeal of a brother and a friend. At the same time, I personally think that, on the Catholic side, this may also help us to come to a realization that we must not settle for the kind of institutionalized dialogue with a handful of officials from a handful of organizations on the Jewish side. We must broaden it into a people-to-people dialogue. Now we must engage the Jewish community in Israel and abroad directly and on a broad front.”

• Andrew Delbanco reviews the Library of America's American Sermons (reviewed here by Alan Jacobs in August/September 1999) in the New Republic and concludes with this: “As an informed selection of sermons strictly defined . . . this is a rich and valuable volume. It reminds us how central to American culture has been the conviction (I revert to John Jay Chapman for the phrase) that ‘there's only one real joy in life . . . the joy of casting at the world the stone of an unknown world’—and how elusive that joy has been in modern times. It confirms that sermons, once widely believed to be conduits to this ‘unknown world,’ have, in our own time, become memorials to lost knowledge.” I'm not sure about the one real joy
in life, but Chapman and Delbanco are undoubtedly right about an unknown world.

• This item appeared in the *Seattle Times* under the title “Lite the Way.” In a meeting with the paper's editorial writers, Father Stephen Sundborg, former Jesuit provincial and now President of Seattle University, noted that the student body is only 40 percent Catholic. Asked how he intended to market the university, he referred to a radio station that describes its programming as “country lite,” meaning a broad definition of country music. So, in a time when the Vatican is taking a close look at Catholic institutions, Seattle University is taking a broader approach that Fr. Sundborg describes as “Catholic Lite.” Of such are the frustrations of the critic. Going back some years now, Catholic universities have been accused of peddling Catholic Lite. Only to have a university president respond with, “Oh, what a very good idea!” Moral: be careful what you accuse people of.

• The Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, does come up with these odd reports. Here’s a release titled, “Atheists and Agnostics Infiltrating Christian Churches.” They have determined, by means of telephone interviews with 192 people, that on a typical weekend about 2 percent of the nation's atheists and agnostics attend church, but on Easter Sunday 12 percent attend. This is “infiltration”? I wouldn't be surprised if some might call it evangelization. Whom are we to convert if not the unconverted? The Barna people go on to say, “Many atheists and agnostics possess theological perspectives that parallel the beliefs of Christians.” One out of three reads the Bible, most believe that there is a Heaven, and one out of five prays to God during a typical week. At least they’re Christian atheists and agnostics, of a sort.

• The insatiable greed of trial lawyers, joined to the mushrooming victimhood cult, was bound to get here sooner or later. But who would have thought Canada would beat us to it? Lawrence Barichello of Toronto heads up an anti-circumcision group called “Intact,” and is looking for men to join in a class-action suit against doctors in order to compensate for emotional injuries resulting from their being circumcised. “No detail is too small,” he says. “If someone taunts you in the locker room about your penis, write down what they said and how you felt about it.” Participants are limited to men circumcised as an infant by a doctor “for nonreligious reasons.” What happened to inclusivity here? A Jewish atheist might cite
the religious reason as a further injury.

- Keith Pavlischek of the Center for Public Justice agrees with the judge who disallowed the “gay panic” defense in the sentencing of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, who beat up Matthew Shepard and left him to die. But he disagrees with some others who agreed with the judge: “‘Gay advocacy’ groups applauded the judge's ruling, denouncing the ‘gay panic’ defense as preposterous and pathetic. About that, they are right. If, however, this defense is preposterous and pathetic, what about the rhetoric from prominent gay rights politicians, activists, and journalists immediately following Shepard's murder last year? For months we heard the refrain (without any appeal to evidence) that the murder was caused by groups like the Family Research Council for suggesting that homosexuals can change; Jerry Falwell and Trent Lott for suggesting that homosexuality is a ‘sin' (always in quotation marks); public officials or activists who oppose ‘gay marriage'; and other private organizations that refuse to compromise traditional moral objections to homosexual practice. To the gay rights crowd all such moral concerns were reduced to a psychological disorder or irrational fear of homosexuals: it's all just ‘homophobia.' We all seem to suffer from ‘gay panic.' If the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights lobby is truly concerned with reducing the incidence of such barbarities, they might begin by stopping their ranting against those who hold principled moral objections to homosexuality. The displacement of guilt from the true perpetrators of real crimes, and the repeated charges of homophobia, merely gives thugs like Henderson and McKinney an excuse for an inexcusable and wicked act.”

- When the Wyoming men who beat up Matthew Shepard and left him to die were sentenced a while back, there was another media torrent against homophobia, the need for laws against hate crimes, and so forth. About the same time, a thirteen-year-old boy in Prairie Grove, Arkansas, was repeatedly sodomized by two homosexual men and suffocated with his own underwear. A number of conservative voices deplored the “double standard” of the media, noting that the Arkansas crime received no national attention at all. A spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, a major gay lobby, said of the killing of Jesse Dirkhising, “This has nothing to do with gay people.” It obviously has as much to do with gay people as the killing of Matthew Shepard, or, more recently, army private Barry Winchell has to do with the state of American society. But I cannot agree with those
who contend that the Arkansas crime should have received media attention comparable to that accorded those crimes. There is no denying that the skewed reporting of the dominant media operates by multiple standards. As George Orwell observed a long time ago, some deaths are politically interesting and others are not. What we witnessed in the case of Matthew Shepard was the media’s calculated and callous political exploitation of human depravity and suffering. It is that exploitation that is to be deplored, not the fact that the Arkansas horror did not receive comparable publicity. The remedy for a dishonest and meretricious media is not equal-time exploitation.

• Thinking that the image of Jesus needed an update, the editors of the National Catholic Reporter held a contest and 1,700 artists submitted their entries for the cover of the paper’s millennium issue. The winner is Jesus of the People by Janet McKenzie of Vermont, who describes herself as a “devout agnostic.” “This painting is about love,” she said. “It's about reminding all of us about the importance of celebrating our differences.” And this Jesus, for whom a young black girl served as the model, is different. Said one of the judges, “It's not real masculine. It's not real feminine. It's not really androgynous, either.” So what's left? He/she/it is most certainly not Jewish. Jesus of the People is the perverse “enculturation” of reconstructing revelation in our image—or at least in the image of the alienated class of the deculturated. “And immediately there was a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ “ But when she heard this, Jesus reassured him, “Relax, I have come to celebrate our differences” (Mark 1, updated).

• There was an emotional moment at the recent Synod for Europe when Irina Ilovaiski Giorgi-Alberti addressed the Pope directly in explaining why Russian Orthodoxy has been so unresponsive, indeed hostile, to the Pope’s efforts to advance the healing of the breach between East and West. Giorgi-Alberti, the editor of La Pensée Russe, which is published in both Moscow and Paris, said that the top Russian hierarchy is succumbing to the “terrible temptation” of letting itself be used politically in order to turn Orthodoxy into an ideological substitute for Marxism-Leninism. This requires that it appear hostile to the West, using the “alibi” that it is only protecting the Orthodox faithful (which, she said, is only 2 or 3 percent of the population) from “proselytism.” Giorgi-Alberti, who was an invited
guest at the synod, said, “‘This rejection of unity is caused by politics, not religion; a refusal to open the doors to Christian brothers of the West and to the Holy Father in particular.’ In an emotional tone, Giorgi-Alberti turned to the Pope and said: ‘Many in Russia have requested me to ask you for forgiveness for this. Many in Russia, among those who have found Christ or are sincerely seeking him, have begged me to tell you that you must not accept the political games of the top hierarchy as an honest expression of their feelings. Above all, they implore you to forgive them, not to abandon them, and not to forget them; they do not want you to fall into the traps often set so that you will distance yourself from them. If this were to happen, it would really be the end of Russia. If the end has not come, it is to a large extent, and I repeat it again, thanks to Your Holiness, and on behalf of those in Russia who know it, I was asked to say to you, Holy Father: may God fully reward you.“

• Among public intellectuals, Irving Kristol is a legend, but he carries that status lightly. Which does not mean he is not capable of being deadly serious about serious things, as, for instance, in a recent article in Azure, “On the Political Stupidity of the Jews.” As a Jewish kid in Brooklyn some sixty years ago, he well understood that he was part of a minority in an overwhelmingly Christian country. That was taken for granted, and everybody, more or less, got along. Since World War II, he writes, Jewish organizations, backed by the court system, have largely succeeded in creating a naked public square, acting on the preposterous assumption that the 2 percent of the population that is Jewish can force the 95 percent that is Christian to go along with the idea that the Constitution forbids any public recognition of the religious realities of America. Kristol notes that there is now something of a religious revival among Christians, and a modest revival among Jews, the latter driven in part by alarm over the rate of intermarriage approaching 50 percent. It is not clear, however, that this new situation is prompting second thoughts among Jewish leaders. Kristol writes: “But this Jewish revival does not prevent American Jews from being intensely and automatically hostile to the concurrent Christian revival. It is fair to say that American Jews wish to be more Jewish while at the same time being frightened at the prospect of American Christians becoming more Christian. It is also fair to say that American Jews see nothing odd in this attitude. Intoxicated with their economic, political, and judicial success over the past half century, American Jews seem to have no reluctance in expressing their vision of an ideal America: a country where
Christians are purely nominal, if that, in their Christianity, while they want the Jews to remain a flourishing religious community. One can easily understand the attractiveness of this vision to Jews. What is less easy to understand is the chutzpah of American Jews in publicly embracing this dual vision. Such arrogance is, I would suggest, a peculiarly Jewish form of political stupidity. For the time being, American Jews are getting away with this arrogance. Indeed, American Christians—and most especially the rising evangelical movements—are extraordinarily tolerant, if more than a little puzzled, by this novel Jewish posture. And the lack of any negative Christian reaction has only encouraged American Jews in the belief that they have discovered some kind of universally applicable formula for dealing with non-Jews.”

• In a lecture at Santa Clara University in California, Father David Hollenbach, S.J., of Boston College addresses “The Common Good in a Divided Society.” He rightly worries about the loss of a commitment to the common good, the divisive effects of the “culture war,” and the exclusion of too many from the opportunities and responsibilities of American life. He says: “Unjust exclusion can take many forms. Most relevant to the United States today is exclusion from the booming economic life of the country. There are so few decent jobs in most urban ghettos that many people simply give up looking for work. This amounts to the institutionalization of despair. When human beings are told repeatedly that they are simply not needed, it takes extraordinary self-confidence to keep trying. Such messages, built into class structures of American life today, lead to the drugs and violence of many American urban centers today. They are the source of what Cornel West has dared to call the ‘nihilism' found among far too many urban youth today.” There is indeed an “institutionalization of despair,” but one wonders if Fr. Hollenbach doesn’t get some things backwards. He works from economics to culture, rather than from culture to economics. Young men who do drugs and violence turn out to be unemployable and are indeed “simply not needed.” Over a million of them are now in jail. Ordinarily capable people who keep trying, or try in the first place, are in this economy generally given the message that they are needed and welcome. As for the source of “nihilism,” living many years in the inner city I never encountered the term and seldom encountered the reality. The more likely source, one may respectfully suggest, is to be found at places such as Cornel West’s Harvard University. On that score, one may even go so far as to suggest that Fr. Hollenbach, although it is surely not his
intention, comes distressingly close to blaming the victim.

• Down in North Carolina, Bill Uzzle puts out the Raleigh Reporter from time to time, with a liberal, so to speak, use of quotations. Here are a few with which I was not familiar. First Malcolm Muggeridge, who wrote like an angel and, when he discovered he couldn't live that way, became a Christian: “Previous civilizations have been overthrown from without by the incursion of barbarian hordes; ours has dreamed up its own dissolution in the minds of our intellectual elites. Not bolshevism, which Stalin liquidated along with the old Bolsheviks; not Nazism, which perished with Hitler in his Berlin bunker; not fascim, which was left hanging upside down from a lamppost, along with Mussolini and his mistress—none of these, history will record, was responsible for bringing down the darkness on our civilization, but liberalism. A solvent rather than a precipitate, a sedative rather than a stimulant, a slough rather than a precipice; blurring the edges of truth, the definition of virtue, the shape of beauty; a cracked bell, a mist, a death wish.” Then Geoffrey Household on politicians: “In arguments with politicians I am always beaten. I cannot express what I believe, whereas they express what they cannot possibly believe.” Richard Reeves on the same subject: “Politicians are different from you and me. The business of reaching for power does something to a man—it closes him off from other men until, day by day, he reaches the point where he instinctively calculates each new situation and each other man with the simplest question: what can this do for me? The process is as inevitable, and as frightening, as hardening of the arteries.” To say it is inevitable is going too far. I immediately thought of my noble friend, Henry Hyde. Finally, this from Bill Sharpe, a retired newspaperman in North Carolina: “When both I and the century were young, we boys did a lot of whistling. So did grownups. It was the most natural thing in the world to walk down the street whistling a tune. I would awake mornings and hear somebody whistling his way to work. I’d walk to school and meet a man cheerfully whistling. Today, folks would be astonished and, perhaps, alarmed at such a sight. Some people were so talented that they could fashion trills and tremolos, like Cornelia Taylor, who was in demand for our amateur theatricals.” I had never thought about that, but he's right. I honestly cannot remember when was the last time I heard somebody whistling, as in really whistling a song. When I was a boy up in the Ottawa Valley, we all did all the time. People thought I was pretty good at it, and I was inclined to agree. I just tried and I can't do it any more. I'll work on it. Not on the
streets of Manhattan, however. “Did you see that crazy whistling priest?” On the other hand, with all those cell phones and Walkmans plugged in their ears, maybe nobody would notice.

- Linda Gibbons of Toronto is a grandmother and a jailbird. In the last five years she has been repeatedly arrested and jailed twelve times for standing in front of an abortuary and praying. Recently Sue Careless, a freelance journalist, was arrested for photographing the arrest of Linda Gibbons. Ian Hunter of the University of Western Ontario comments in the *National Post*: “The abortion issue is unique in that it begins in lies and cannot be sustained without lies. It begins by denying the elementary biological evidence regarding human life, its origin and development. It requires court injunctions to prevent citizens from praying on public streets. It necessitates arrest and prosecution of journalists who would seek to show and tell the public how this injunction is enforced. In a rights-obsessed country, it requires us to overlook the most fundamental right of all: the right to life. Will Linda Gibbons and Sue Careless find their liberty in our Charter of Rights? I hope so, but I doubt it. As the great American jurist, Learned Hand, once wrote, ‘We rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. And what is this liberty which must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled, will; it is not the freedom to do as one likes. That is a denial of liberty, and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check upon their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few. . . . The spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten—that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.’“

- Academic integrity means independence from outside influences. That was the gist of an article coauthored by Father Edward Malloy, President of Notre Dame, about a year ago and published in *America*. Recognizing the authority of the bishops over the teaching of theology would be, he said, “a catastrophe.” It would mean “the sacrifice of many of those prerogatives that make Catholic universities and their professional staffs the respected
and influential members of the higher education community that they are.” Readers are familiar with Fr. James Burtchaell’s humorously devastating recital of the myriad outside agencies to which Notre Dame and other church schools submit themselves (see “The ‘Autonomy’ of the University of St. Dympna,” Public Square, August/September 1999). Now Notre Dame is in trouble with the National College Athletic Association (NCAA). The school has been put on probation for violations arising from a messy scandal in which a woman embezzled money to lavish on players with whom she was having affairs. Fr. Malloy and his colleagues have been the perfect picture of docility in submitting themselves to the authority of the NCAA. Notre Dame investigated the allegations, reported its findings to the association, meekly accepted its judgment. Not even one whimper about institutional autonomy, etc. Does this mean that Notre Dame cares more about the integrity of its football program than its theology department? Does this mean that the NCAA is less of an “outside” influence than the Catholic Church? That may be overreading, but the questions should not be dismissed out of hand. In any event, it is perhaps heartening that Fr. Malloy and Notre Dame recognize the legitimacy of authority and accountability in things that really matter. Perhaps.

• In worship there is repetition, and then there is repetition. Carol Zaleski of Smith College writes in that admirable journal of liturgical renewal, Antiphon, under the title “Worship and American Cultural Spirituality.” Catherine Pickstock has suggested that the puzzling repetitions in the text of the preconciliar Roman rite constituted a ‘liturgical stammer,’ a stammer like that of Moses, most fitting for the audacious enterprise of approaching the altar of God. The penitential drama of drawing near and stepping back, the divine drama of manifestation and hiding, the initiatory drama of the traditio and reddito symboli, the priestly drama of representing Christ in his three offices as prophet, priest, and king—all these dramatic events are well served by the stops and starts, the repeated rebeginnings of the Roman rite. If this sounds too somber, consider instead the examples of children whose spontaneity manifests itself in endless repetition of chants and rhymes, sense and nonsense. In children, as in flourishing religious cultures, ritual repetition is linked to playfulness and creativity, rather than to stagnation. Erik Erikson made this point quite definitively in Toys and Reasons and other landmark studies of child development and its adult fruits. G. K. Chesterton captures the idea in a famous passage in Orthodoxy: ‘Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in
spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again,” and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon.” Repetition is the stuff of poetry; incantation enchants. Where disincantation occurs, disenchantment will follow.” (For information about Antiphon, write the Society for Catholic Liturgy, 331 East South Temple St., Salt Lake City, Utah 84111.)

• Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr. has died. I did not name him in last month’s account of my 1993 near-death, but he was the person who sent me the book on his son’s heroic struggle with cancer, My Father, My Son. As Commander of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific, he ordered the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. Bud Zumwalt thought long and hard about moral dilemmas. He believed that the chemical contributed to the death of his son but saved many thousands of other American lives by making it difficult for Vietcong snipers to hide. Of the conflict itself he said, “If I knew the U.S. would make a decision to lose the war, we should not have gone into the war to begin with.” Bud and I worked together for years on the board and executive committee of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. He was reticent in expressing his deepest beliefs, but the obvious center of gravity was honor, duty, country. He was ever the gentleman and quiet warrior. I suppose he came as close as anyone I have known to the ideal of the Roman. That put him solidly in Augustine’s terrestrial city, but there were occasions when he indicated his awareness that true home is elsewhere. Requiescat in pace.

• You may not believe this, but some readers say they miss those gentle and ever so whimsical proddings to send us the names of people who are prospective subscribers. Admittedly, other readers complained about, as one put it, “that incessant begging.” Please. It is not begging to suggest that you share what you have found. In any event, we will be happy to send a sample issue of this journal to people you think are likely subscribers. Please send names and addresses to FIRST THINGS, 156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 400, New York, NY 10010 (or e-mail to subscriberservices@pma-inc.net). On the other hand, if they're ready to subscribe, call toll-free 1-800-783-4903.
• There is an opening for a one-year internship with FT, beginning June or September. Please send resume, reason for interest, and writing sample to the editorial office, attention James Nuechterlein.

• Friend and frequent contributor to these pages, Hadley Arkes, is fond of referring to “FIRST THINGS, the journal.” The implied reference is to his excellent 1986 book on principles of morals and justice, which bears the title First Things. Thus, with an unbecoming, albeit understandable, hint of proprietorial pride, does Professor Arkes suggest that we came along four years later and stole his title. Now J. Bottum, erstwhile Associate Editor of FT whose apostasy to the Weekly Standard has not been forgiven (although we’re glad for his return as our Poetry Editor), sends us a finding from his inveterate prowling of bookstores. It is a 1924 volume of exhortations to virtue by the President of Girard College, Philadelphia, who bears the Dickensian name of Cheesman A. Herrick. The book is called First Things. I have no evidence that Prof. Arkes was familiar with Herrick’s effort, and it seems improbable since, in the words of Bottum, Herrick’s First Things is “compounded out of nearly equal parts pleonasm and pomposity,” whereas the Arkes First Things is incisive and modest to a fault. In fact, as noted when we launched this enterprise, our search for a title reached back long before 1924, never mind 1986, to the most important of the theological works of Origen (185-254), Peri Archon, which may be roughly translated as “First Things.” (Lest anyone be inclined to get legally serious about this friendly fuss, titles cannot be copyrighted according to U.S. law. Whether that is the case with law pertinent to third-century Alexandria, I have no idea.)

Sources:


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