

The True and Godly
 Liberal: Public Theology
 for the Age of Innovism

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APOLOGIA PRO LIBRO SUO ET APOLOGIA PRO FIDE SUA

One can be a serious Christian, favoring for all humans a turn towards the Triune God, and at the same time, without serious contradiction, a serious economic and social and political liberal, favoring for all humans a serious equality of permission under law. That is, one can be serious all round, advocating both for the divinity of Jesus and for the fullest liberty for human conduct, conscience, conversation, and commerce. One can reject Satan in all his ever-popular forms, and yet also reject physically coerced collectivism in almost all of its own ever-popular forms. One can be a “true liberal Christian,” advocating liberty of the will, and rejecting “statism,” the widespread belief that our masters should rule over us unruly children.

A Christian liberalism can entail, though, a cheerful obedience to a modest state pursuing a few reasonable public purposes. For example, compelled vaccination for fatally contagious diseases. Non-imperial national defense. Judges and police enforcing a restrained criminal law and a civil law of torts. Yet much of what the state has abrogated to itself during the past century, with the approval of voters wishing in effect to be mastered and parented, should in justice and temperance and prudence be left to the initiative of you and me and our fellow citizens, as responsible adults. The few collective initiatives should be as small and local as is prudent, in the manner of the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching. True, sometimes a centralized standard should be applied, with an occasional subvention for, say, elementary education out of Illinois taxes and even out of Federal taxes. But very seldom should we want direct supply from the state, especially states that have been captured by one group, such as the Illinois medial doctors or Illinois unionized electricians or the upper-middle class members of the Illinois school boards and the draft boards. Urged on by uniformed voters and misled theorists, the modern state, from American municipal socialism in the late 19th century to Soviet central panning un the late 20th, have repeatedly misstopped in sensible supply or demand. As is already the case in, say, Sweden, there should instead be many private or highly local roads, water supplies, schools. A Christian liberal, in other words, is not required to approve of a big, all-wise, top-down, coercive, corrupted, centralized, infantilizing governance by a set of human masters, “integralism” in its extreme Christian form. We are vastly richer now than in 1776 not because of most state policies but in spite of them.

Nor is the Christian liberal required to approve of what many good people, boldly appropriating the honored name of “liberal,” view as a *nuanced, moderate* statism. An anti-liberal “liberalism” since the British New Liberals, the American Progressives, and the coming of increased “state capacity” has resulted in mega-states even in the UK, the USA, and France, those cradles of our liberties. Coercions by the state have expanded beyond wise limits. They have sometimes been overturned, yet sometimes affirmed, for example by the Supreme Court of the United States. *Brown v. Board of Education*. *Loving v. Virginia*. *Kelo v. City of New London*. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*.

What I have called “statism,” proliferating on the left and right and center in the century past, is the opposite of true liberalism. We true liberals, listening intently to Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill or Isaiah Berlin, do admit a role for the state. We are not literal anarchists. Admittedly, accusing us of wanting to abolish the state entirely makes it easier to get around our very reasonable suggestions for improvement. But it’s a short-cutting ploy, not a reasoned argument. And it supposes that Smith, Mill, and Berlin were idiots.

We true *Christian* liberals, who listen intently to the poetry of King David and of Leonard Cohen, and to the prose of St. Paul and of the Dalai Lama, note that God has liberated our individual human wills. God evidently wants us to use them without unreasonable human coercions by the masters or the husbands or the parents or the governors. A true economic and political liberalism can contribute mightily to Christianity, as much as to Islam and Hinduism and even to an earnest agnosticism.

God comes first and last, of course, the telos of our being, in the church, the home, and the market, being present in prayer, in love, and in work. Yet economic liberalism, I repeat, can contribute to a virtuous faith. It can do so, for example, by encouraging in the marketplace a practice of virtuous soul-crafting. The crafting was called *doux commerce* by some 18th-century French writers, who had ample experience with the coerced, collective alternatives imposed by *l’État*. Montesquieu declared, “wherever there are sweet

manners, there is commerce; and ... wherever there is commerce, there are sweet manners.”¹ An emerging scientific finding affirms that *Homo sapiens* is an unusually cooperative and loving species, like the dogs that women domesticated from wolves twenty millennia ago. Christianity and liberalism, both, differ from a wolfish paganism or statism, by speaking steadily of love, not hate, of grace, not coercion.

Commercial liberty, in other words, does not inevitably corrupt a soul to a wolfish worship of Mammon—Jesus’ Aramaic for “money /wealth,” as in Matthew 6:24. The corruption has been routinely claimed, especially by Christians, to be inevitable, an irresistible temptation to the sin of greed. The claim, despite its ancient and modern dominance over popular and academic rhetoric, has surprisingly little backing in logic or evidence. A version of a carelessly labeled “greed,” after all, is present in all living things, or else they don’t live. Yet human greed is *not* good. Many other virtues, such as an adult justice and temperance, are specifically human, and prominent in *doux commerce*. Yes, a childish, wolfish, greed for money (*philarguria*, “avarice,” literally “love of silver”), and for other earthly trinkets, is a root of all, or at any rate much, evil, as was asserted in Timothy 6:10 by a pseudo-Paul (writing, miraculously, decades after the death of the actual Paul). But the root of the root is the sin of greed defined carefully, not the money/silver/wealth in itself, or the system in which it is used.

Money and its system, after all, are not, as is widely believed, some corrupting novelty peculiar to our nasty age of iron, or of plastic. They are ancient devices, used by sinner and saint alike for their evil or innocent purposes. They are no more intrinsically corrupting than horses or arrows or inheritance practices. Ever since the pyramids, or the song lies, or the caves, we humans have used money in its triple aspects, as a store of capital, a standard of social value, and a medium of exchange. Of the first two: we have always and everywhere accumulated and calculated. Even Robinson Crusoe before Friday did. A soon as any property exists, a compound spear, say, all human societies have such stores and standards of value.² True, inside a single person or a family or a group of loving friends, or inside organizations of command such as armies and firms, we do not need the third function of money, as a medium of exchange. In such contexts the intrusion of money-as-exchange is called “corruption,” because it crowds out sacred values. But when dealing with strangers, especially at arm’s length, we do need such a medium, that is, some convenient item to offer in exchanges. It is therefore to be called “money” in all three of its aspects. The units of money can be remembered promises, cowry shells, bits of gold clipped from a coil, bank accounts, crypto currencies. Even hunter-gatherers needed money when they came to worship and marry and trade from all over Britain at Stonehenge, or, similarly, according to one interpretation, from all over the upper Middle East at Göbekli Tepe.

In particular, money is not merely coinage issued by the kings of northern Asia Minor c. 700 BCE, or the paper money issued by merchants in China c. 700 CE, reinvented in colonial Massachusetts in the 1690s. For one-and-a-half million years Acheulean hand “axes” were piled by the hundreds at numerous sites of *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*. Obviously they could have acted as money in its functions as a store of value and a unit of account. Yet the axes could even, in an admittedly clumsy manner, be used for exchange with outlanders—my little bag of lovely post-Acheulean Clovis points could exchange for the steak from your mastodon kill. Aboriginal Australians traded for jewelry and boomerangs over hundreds of miles.³ Cigarettes served a money in POW camps, and fell in value when the Red Cross packages brought more of them on the first of each month, rising in value as people smoked them up.

1 Montesquieu 1748, Bk. 20, Chp. 1, “If Commerce.”: “que partout où il y a des mœurs douces, il y a du commerce; et que partout où il y a du commerce, il y a des mœurs douces.”

2 Wilson, Bart. 2020. *The Property Species: Mine, Yours, and the Human Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Wilson, Bart and Vernon L. Smith. 2019. *Humanomics: Moral Sentiments and the Wealth of Nations for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt. 1964. *The World of the First Australians*, p.113. London: Angus & Robertson Ltd.

You can call all this “barter” if you wish, and believe you have thereby cleverly evaded using the word “money.” But, a “bartered” commodity, such as cattle in East Africa, is money even in its function on of exchange if it is habitually used to buy, say, wives, as it was there. The words “cattle” and “chattel” and “capital” are Latinate cousins. The Greek word *drachma* is derived from the word for “clutch,” the original coin being worth a clutch of arrows—which is to say that arrows themselves, those handy little compound spears with an artificial intelligence machine for hurling them, could be seen as money.

And likewise it has always been, too, in exchanges of labor for money. The workers on the pyramids, traditionally believed to be enslaved, have been found recently to have probably been free labor paid in money. Jesus the Anointed One c. 30 CE lived in a commercial and monetized society (“Show me the coin of the poll-tax”), and did not require that every single fisherman leave his nets to become his mendicant disciple.⁴ He is said in Luke 5:6 to have given the fisherman Simon Peter a great catch miraculously. Simon and his fellows promptly sold it in the market for *mammon*, to feed their families, by the secular miracle of voluntary exchange, and to pay the poll-tax, by the anti-miracle of statist coercion.

In short, we have always been modern. As the medievalist David Herlihy declared decades ago, “Research has all but wiped from the ledgers the supposed gulf, once considered fundamental, between a medieval manorial economy and the capitalism of the modern period.”⁵ Contrary to a belief present in the minds of most educated people—a belief contradicted over the past century by historical research—human *mammon*, commerce, wages, employment, property, land rents, capital, saving, accumulation, money, trade, credit, accounting, factories, large-scale manufacturing, banking, bills of exchange, individualism, objectification, commodification, luxury, consumerism, rationality, calculation, business as *eine Berufung*, disenchantment, self-control, entrepreneurship, price, and profit are mostly ancient and universal. They need not be corrupting, if we perform also the right spiritual work.

What then is the problem?



The modern and secular granting of liberty of permission yields an adult liberated from hierarchy in order to deal at will in the market, church, society, and home—though constrained in justice by identical liberal permissions granted to all others, and by the laws of God and Nature. Modern liberty matures our souls.

The good result is not of course automatic. It requires that spiritual work, guided by what the theologian Charles T. Mathewes calls—referring to the old genre during the age of naturalized hierarchy called a “mirror for princes” offering instruction to a prince who wanted to be good, or at any rate effective—a mirror for Christian citizens.⁶ But populist preaching against *mammon*, or self-flagellation for one’s honestly acquired wealth, or marxoid superstitions about exploitation in the “capitalist” economy, or lofty sneering at consumption by *profanum vulgus*, all of which nowadays are commonplaces in theological circles, and even in the writings of my friend the excellent Chuck Mathewes, is not the right kind of spiritual work. A corruption of souls comes rather from any of the numerous ancient and modern means of keeping us as slaves or children under supervision by our betters—or, more terribly, corrupting us to *want* to be slaves or children, not of God but of humans, evermore. Then we assuredly do become greedy, and sinful in every means and manner available.

And on the other side, the choice to become that physically coercive supervisor, and then unjustly, arrogantly presuming to be an arbitrary master or parent over other adults, damages the supervisor’s soul, too. The supervising economists in the past century of steadily increasing state power, for example, have

4 All direct quotations from the New Testament are from Hart’s new translation, because I admire it and because I want to bias the case against my own liberalism and in favor of Hart’s statism. Hart, David Bentley. 2017. *New Testament*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

5 Herlihy, David. 1971. *The history of feudalism*. New York: Walker.

6 Mathewes, Charles T. 2007. *A Theology of Public Life*, p. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

become notoriously proud, and accustomed to recommending more and more coercions. Tax Peter to pay Paul. Reregulate this or that innocent deal.

Such coercive power tends to corrupt. The greater the coercive power a person has, the higher—I say, being myself for my sins one of the economists, and therefore unable to resist making such a point—is the opportunity cost of refraining from using it, in material trinkets and masterful pride given up. A liberal economist such as I am who recommends restraint in policy—no coercive zoning, no occupational licensing, no tariffs on imports, no Jones Act between U.S. ports—is recommending that her power be surrendered, at the cost to her of her employment and pride. The logic of trinkets given up is why a tyrant such as Putin or Erdogan seems so often to be pathetically trapped in his power, unable to surrender any bit of it. And such power is of course macho, beloved especially by men. In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the Party man O’Brien declares, “Always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.”⁷

Contrariwise, the relative price of giving up coercive power—being instead a just and temperate person, and submissive to the masters—declines as the power a person possesses declines. It’s conventionally seen as feminine. When she witnessed a religious procession one night in the late 1930s in a Portuguese fishing village it was suddenly plain to Simone Weil (1909-1943), a French secular Jew on her way to a mystic Christianity, that “Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.”⁸ She echoes Nietzsche’s sneer at “slave morality,” subordinate to the pagan and masculine and aristocratic virtues he admired. Aristotle, too, admired them. Alasdair MacIntyre notes that “Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St. Paul,” with all his embarrassingly feminine talk of a slavish subordination to Christ Jesus.⁹

A true adulthood in a true liberalism depends on properly using God’s gift of liberty of the will, justly, prudently, temperately, courageously, lovingly, hopefully, faithfully, when it has not been stolen by the masters of the Party of the Boot, or by a corrupt secular clergy, or when it has not been cravenly cast away by submission to these. Until the coming of liberalism in the 18th and 19th centuries in northwestern Europe, our masters routinely claimed to channel God’s will, and most of us believed them. In 1598 James VI of Scotland, soon to be James I of England declared that “a king is preferred by God above all other ranks and degrees of men.”¹⁰ The declaration did not startle his future English subjects, accustomed as they were to Tudor statism. His son Charles declared from his scaffold that “a sovereign and a subject are clean different things,” and for a long time after 1649 most English people agreed. Mastery was thereby naturalized with holy water. Then slowly, incompletely, but with great consequence, there arrived, at first only in northwestern Europe and some of its offshoots, a liberty from coerced human mastery. The nascent liberalism was often articulated in the writings and actions of devout and liberal Christians, such as John Newton, Abigail Adams, Robert Burns, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Tocqueville, Acton.

One must want to be so liberated, to be as Burns put it, “a man o’ independent mind,” as one must want to be an adult man instead of a perpetual boy, a liberated woman instead of a perpetual girl. The liberal economist and Nobelist James Buchanan (1919-2013) wrote in 2005 an essay entitled “Afraid to Be Free: Dependency as Desideratum,” as the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm had written in 1941 *Escape from Freedom*. Though Buchanan would not have been comfortable with the religious point, and Fromm confined religion to Protestantism, a grown-up liberty is in fact a leading promise of any Christianity. As St. Paul may have said, “however long a period the heir is an infant, he is no different from a slave . . . He is subject to legal guardians” (Gal. 4: 1,2; this one may have been genuinely Pauline). God does not want us to

7 Orwell, George. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Secker & Warburg.

8 Coles, Robert. 2001. *Simone Weil: a modern pilgrimage*, p. 116. Woodstock, Vt.: Skylight Paths Pub.

9 MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

10 James VI 1598.

be perpetual, predestined children, the slaves to Big Brother or to our own childish passions. After redemption by Christ, “you are no longer a slave, but a son” to God (Gal. 3:7). The result of liberated adulthood is an approach to God, says Paul, becoming the “heir.” A Christian God says: Grow up to *imago Dei*. Another word for Christian liberalism could be “adultism.”

Such in brief is the case for an economically liberal Christianity, which I will call a “liberalist” Christianity. The case for the other, reversed order of words—a Christian liberalism—is in brief that liberalism without a commitment to something like Christianity leaves us as vending machines, not as adult heirs with a liberated will turned voluntarily, yet by God’s grace, towards God, or towards some other transcendent giving a virtuous meaning to our lives. The other, stripped-down model of humanity was favored by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Bentham, and is favored now by too many of my colleagues in economics. The turn towards a vending-machine model of humans, responding only to outer incentives such as offers of *mammon*, or the lash applied to the slave, made it seem plausible that our ruler should be *Il Principe*, or the Leviathan, or the prison guard surveilling us from the panopticon—or the modern politician, advised by the wise economist, applying top-down coercions alleged to result in a chaste citizenry or the general will or the national good or the greatest utility or the maximum GDP per person.

But to the contrary, we are humans, with adult, liberated, creative, and sweetly persuadable wills, with varied innocent or even helpful projects, happily possessing, or sadly lacking, this or that virtue of temperance and courage and the rest of the human virtues. And humans then trade and converse. We are therefore to be studied with a liberal and Christian “humanomics.” Humanomics as science still does the economics rigorously in the usual ways. Coherent economic theory. Econometrics when relevant. Common sense, always. Good show. But it retains the human soul, and the four thousand years of reflection on it by humans writing, in order to achieve a full and honorable science of humans in the economy. It does its experiments, say, soulfully. And humanomics furthermore says that we are to be ruled by something like a Christian liberalism—by liberal laws not by illiberal men. Nonetheless, it does the world’s work in the market and in the state efficiently. No tariffs on international trade, or a Jones Act on trade between the mainland and Puerto Rico. Use local knowledge instead of industrial policy from Washington. Innovate by helpfully breaking some of the existing rules of the game. Splendid. But humanomics also retains the sacred human ethics that in fact undergirds godly human action, for full and honorable work in the world. It works and governs ethically, temperately, justly, lovingly.

I said that liberalism would be better with a commitment to “*something like Christianity*.” Cicero lambastes the Epicureans—the ancient Mediterranean’s version of modern economists and their materialist allies—as “those men who in the manner of cattle [*pecudum ritu*, literally ‘by the rite of the cattle’] refer everything to pleasure” and who “with even less humanity. . . say that friendships are to be sought for protection and aid, not for caring.” He calls them “men abandoned to pleasure,” being theorists of a prudence-only vending-machine who “when they dispute about friendship have understanding of neither its practice nor its theory.”¹¹ Yes. In the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata* the identical metaphor against the vending machine appears. A hero of the tale, the virtue-seeking if flawed Yudhishtira, is asked by his wife, “Why be virtuous?” He replies, “Were *dharma* [truth leading to virtue] to be fruitless . . . [humans] would live as cattle.”¹² That’s right, and Ciceronian—though Yudhishtira seems actually to be making more a social and Kantian point about outcomes of cattlelike behavior than making the properly stoic point about justice and self-respect, disregarding the outcomes. Virtue is anyway adult and godly, not cattle-like, a human turning towards God. Matthewes argues that “Augustinians [such as he is] can affirm that public life can be a way for humans to come to participate in God.”¹³ Contrary to the side-swipes by Matthewes at the “consumer society,” a creative life in an economy can be purifying—to use his favorite words, “ascetically” and as a

11 Cicero, *De amicitia* ix, 32; xii, 46; xiv, 52.

12 Marx, Karl. 2009. *Das kapital: a critique of political economy*, p. 73. Washington DC: Regnery Pub.

13 Matthewes 2007, p. 21.

matter of “enduring.” “Genuine goods can be pursued,” he rightly concludes, as the *boni ardui* that Aquinas called them. It’s not all stupid tinsel.

Mere human cattle, of course, are best driven by an expert human cowherd. Or the faux-human vending machine is to be kicked. They are to be “incentivized” or “nudged” or “planned,” as the modern economists and their followers left or right have been saying now for a century and a half, in their justifications for proliferating coercions by our masters, commissars, *Führers*, parents, husbands, administrators, and social engineers.

Prominent in this line recently, for example, are the economist Daron Acemoglu and the political scientist James Robinson, in their many eloquent and scholarly yet relentlessly anti-liberal and state-loving publications. In their 2019 book *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty* for example, they urge a fuller empowerment of Leviathan, to increase what they call, startlingly, “liberty.”¹⁴ They view with equanimity that the modern Leviathan, in the words of 1776, has “erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.”

In Acemoglu and Robinson, and in a similar book by Acemoglu and Johnson, A bigger and bigger state serves a bizarrely slavish conception of “liberty.” They merge a liberty defined as lack of coercion by a master with a “freedom” to acquire goods. A higher budget line, as an economist would put it, makes you free. You’re “free” to fly to Paris if you’re rich. Never mind if your liberty *from coercions by masters* is at the same time null and void. The master coerces you, say, to fly to Paris, perhaps to install you in the Bastille, or coerces taxes from you to subsidize an Anglo-French Concorde airplane on which you ride, in shackles. A slave with ample food and airplane tickets is said in such a political rhetoric to be “free.”

Merging a lack of coercion by humans into a lack of material income is a characteristically modern error, most easily committed in English, with its doubled words liberty/freedom. The two words have in the past couple of centuries diverged in connotation. The Latinate word “liberty” still connotes on English tongues the right not to be coerced by other humans; the right of a non-slave, as in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first of Four Freedoms in his declaration of 1941: freedom of speech. The Germanic word “freedom” by contrast has come to connote the right to have lots of stuff, even if achieved by takings from others—in Roosevelt’s quadrivium a “freedom from want.” The error is most easily committed by economists, with their mechanical view of liberty as freedom from the constraints of nature or scarcity, that is, having a higher budget line. The Nobel economist Amartya Sen, for example, declared in 1999 that enriching development simply *is* freedom.

Yet even the economics is directive. A bigger state does not obviously give us higher budget lines. On the contrary, considering the historical evidence and the economic logic, it seems likely to reduce, not increase, the goods we can make and consume. The Concorde did. The profitable innovations exploding after 1776 came from individual minds freshly liberated, not from fresh schemes of coercion by the masters. And setting the economic likelihoods aside, the associated politics is most worrying. The “liberty” in *The Narrow Corridor* is a program to remain—so long as the manna keeps falling, and Concordes keep being built—a dependent child or an obedient slave to the Leviathan state. Quoth James I/VI, in any “well ruled commonwealths the style *Pater patriae* was ever ... used to kings.” Acemoglu and Robinson assure us that the *Pater/Leviathan* will be kept sweet. They do not tell us how.

The hoped-for sweetness of the Acemoglu-Robinson paternalism, or the Sen-Nussbaum provision of capabilities beyond a full equality of permission, or the Thaler-Sunstein nudging by oh-so clever economists, echoes the old justifying myth in a slave society of the Good Master. One sees the myth articulated in

14 The full case for Acemoglu and Robinson’s statism, their definition of liberty, and their inattention to how the Leviathan is to be kept with the narrow corridor is given in McCloskey, D. N. 2021. *Bettering Humanomics: A New, and Old, Way of Doing Economic Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See also: Acemoglu, Daron and James A. Robinson. 2019. *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*. New York: Penguin Press.

the letters of Seneca to Lucilius, or for that matter in St. Paul's letter to Philemon. Seneca writes, "Live mercifully with your slave, amicably even. ... Don't you know what our ancestors did to eliminate resentment towards masters and abuse towards slaves? They used the name 'father of the household' for the master and 'members of the household' for the slaves."¹⁵ Yet of course, when exercised over adults, such a paternalism diminishes in soul and even often enough in goods both "father" and "son." To call a Black man "boy" has the same valence, and when elevated to law the same material result.

A Christian liberalism of redeemed adulthood seems on its face better. A dissolution of enslavement to other humans need not interfere with the loving intimacy of our relationship with God, even a metaphorical slavery to God. Aquinas would say that on the contrary a true liberty even in commerce, like a true liberty elsewhere, functions in bringing humans closer to God. Or can.

Unlike the justifications in the modern theory of the sweet social engineer or in the ancient one of the Good Master, humanomics and liberalism honor the liberated soul and honor its commitment to an ethical transcendent.¹⁶ The liberal and virtuous—though lamentably anti-theistic—David Hume called such a commitment "moral sentiment," felt prior to any intellectualizing of the virtues. The Soviet novelist and emergent liberal of the 1950s Vasily Grossman called it "dumb, blind love" for individual humans, against the systematic corruptions of "love" for the Good Master or the mega-State or the permanent Revolution or the mythologized *Duce*.¹⁷ Another name for the adult, soulful, loving, ethical, liberal transcendent, I say again, is Christianity.



Humans require some sort of transcendent, whether good, indifferent, or evil, which can be God or Baseball or the Thousand-Year Reich. They just do. The Anglican theologian Richard Hooker expressed it in 1593:

Man doth seek a triple perfection: first a sensual ... then an intellectual. ... Man doth not seem to rest satisfied ... but doth further covet ... somewhat divine and heavenly, which with hidden exultation ... [such desire] rather surmiseth than conceiveth. ... For although the beauties, riches, honors, sciences, virtues, and perfections of all men living, were in the present possession of one; yet somewhat beyond and above all this there would still be sought and earnestly thirsted for.¹⁸

Such an earnest thirst motivates what Eric Hoffer in 1951 called the true believer.¹⁹ In politics, as in Europe repeatedly from 1517, the true believer staffs a revolution, whether violent or peaceful. Political revolutions, Hoffer noted, resemble religious revivals. The liberal Christian, however, thirsts earnestly for a peaceful, inner revolution, rejecting a violent, outer one. Listen to Archbishop Tutu. The Romanian political rhetorician Cătălin Mamali puts it this way: "The core point is that the inner revolution, based on high moral principles, is the necessary condition for any social revolution that could make the human condition more

15 Seneca. C., 47:13-14. *Dominum patrem familiae appelaverunt*—"they called their master father of the household." The earlier Latin genitive, *paterfamilias*, is here referred to. *Familieiae* commonly meant "slave staff" (as Richard Saller notes, quoted in the *Wilionary* entry for "*familia*"). It is so used in medieval documents, meaning "servants."

16 And the full case for humanomics is given in McCloskey 2021. The very word was first used in 1976 as the title of his book by the Czech economist Eugen Loegl, though after a promising start he drifted away from its intrinsic liberalism. The recent coinage is due to Bart Wilson.

17 Vasily Grossman (p. 394) at the end of Ikonnikov's letter: "This dumb, blind love is man's meaning. If what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer." Grossman, Vasily. 1960/2006. *Life and Fate*. New York: Random House.

18 Hooker, Richard. *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. First Book, XI, 4, pp. 205-206.

19 Hoffer, Eric. 1951. *The True Believer*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

humane.”²⁰ It is exhibited in a true Buddhist like the Dalai Lama (b.1935) or a true Christian like Harriet Tubman (b. 1822) or a true liberal like Adam Smith (b. 1723). The violent, outer revolution doesn’t pause to change minds or souls. It doesn’t have to. It therefore sounds dead easy, which is part of its charm. Presto! Merely put the enemies of the outer revolution blindfolded up against a wall, and shoot—the Catholics, say, the Loyalists, the bourgeoisie, the fascists. Without changed minds, though, the coercions of outer revolution regularly corrupt the spiritual goal of the revolution itself. They have done so repeatedly, dismally, tragically. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Mamali wonders why this point in a political sermon—that only inner revolutions work for permanent good—is nonetheless “marginalized by so many political and social scientists.”²¹ Perhaps it is because the point is rhetorical, and after the hard men of the 17th century, who preached passionately against preaching in English, French, and Latin, the “merely” rhetorical, or for that matter the “merely” ethical, and by now the “merely” religious, has been under a tough-guy, materialist cloud. We are all historical materialists now. Mamali observes that the rhetorical and ethical point of an inner revolution has been especially preached since the 18th century by Americans, such as Franklin, Thoreau, Emerson, Lincoln, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King. And such preaching in the American liberal experiment inspired others, Mamali further observes, such as “Gandhi, Patočka, Kołakowski, Mandela, imprisoned A. S. Kyi.”

It’s puzzling that this second and characteristically American contribution to political thought—the first, as Louis Hartz pointed out long ago, is the liberalism of “No Masters”—has been absentmindedly set aside by American political philosophers of the academy. Perhaps the setting aside comes out of the old U.S. cringe in the presence of European culture, or perhaps out of the rhetoric a century ago of the Revolt Against the Village, by people like by Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, H. L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis. Whatever its origin, American political philosophers have adopted a European hermeneutics of suspicion and a European fatalism of outlook and a European materialism of causation. Tough-guy technique. Taken together, such theoretical axioms support the sufficiency of a solely outer revolution. “No preaching, please, no persuasion. We’re tough guys. When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my gun. Realize, all you soft and naïve and feminine fools, the role of your class in history, materially determined, or of the *deutsche Volk* in the next thousand years, genetically determined. For any merely inner, rhetorical supplements, trivial though they are—being mere superstructures erected upon a material foundation—you can rely on films about the battleship *Potemkin* or about the triumph of the will, or on the changing nature of man under the dictatorship of the proletariat, or on the Little Red Book of Chairman Mao, or on the handsomely bound volumes of Marxist-Leninist texts.” American academic theologians, suspicious and fatalistic and materialist in theory, disdain what they take to be American materialism in the Midwestern village. You would think that “No Human Masters” and “Inner Spiritual Revolution” would appeal to any Christian, especially an American one. You would think that when they hear the word “gun,” they would reach for their culture.

One in the long list of Americans such as Walt Whitman and Will Rogers and Barack Obama preaching against masters and in favor of inner revolution was my wise and ethical colleague, the economist Milton Friedman (1912-2006). Yes, I know. you are shocked and indignant. Many anti-liberals believe they detest what they believe are Milton’s ideas and actions, wholly misapprehended. As you may read in Jennifer Burns’s *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative* (2023), Milton was in fact open-hearted and optimistic, though steadily and irritatingly argumentative in aid of his truth. Like Maggie Smith playing Violet Crawley, the dowager countess in “Downton Abbey,” Milton didn’t argue. He explained. Unceasingly.

Except for service during the War against fascism, Milton never did paid work for any state. Persuasion of people, not coercion by states, was his policy. He advised theoretically on state policy from a distance, out in Chicago or San Francisco, solely in his writings, his speeches, and his TV show. Rhetoric. He relied on sweet talk, even in his one meeting with General Pinochet, the tyrant of Chile, a relationship absurdly exaggerated and distorted in the nightmares of the left. Milton was not “an advisor “to the Pinochet regime. He

20 Mamali, Cătălin. 2019. <https://www.easp.eu/news/itm/?id=1024>

21 Mamali, Cătălin. 2022. Suppressed in his homeland. *Zeitschrift für Psychodrama und Soziometrie* 21(S1):1-8.

spent a total of 45 minutes—unwisely perhaps in view of his lifelong disdain for tyrants—trying to persuade the General to restrain the money supply. That was it. Don't print too much state currency. He advocated all such liberalisms. Abolish the military draft. Legalize all recreational drugs. Eliminate professional licensure by the state. End all tariffs on imports. Encourage immigration. Give people the liberty to choose.

I once overheard Milton arguing amiably in the coffee room of the Social Science Building at the University of Chicago with his materialist colleague and friend George Stigler, another Nobel winner in economics. Stigler said in effect, "It's silly of you, Milton, to try to persuade people. Be instead, like me, suspicious and fatalistic and materialistic. People follow only their material self-interests, incentivized by the coercions of the state's law. Persuasions are mere superstructure, and therefore bootless." (You can see why I once in print called Stigler, and Murray Rothbard the anarchist economist, "vulgar Marxists"; George was amused, Murray was indignant, and wrote to George complaining about me).

In the coffee room in response to George's advocacy of cynicism, Milton, after a thoughtful sip, replied in effect, "No, George, people can be persuaded to an inner revolution. Laws and souls can be changed. I am a teacher—if you wish, a 'preacher.'" This non-"conservative" preached No Masters and the Inner Revolution. And he achieved them in part, at least among auditors willing to listen, really listen—as, startlingly, late in his own life the French leftist Michel Foucault troubled to do.

Friedman was a true liberal. But his line of argument, put forward also by my many dear, anti-religious, male, American friends in the Liberty Movement 1776 to the present, such as A.C. Harberger, Walter Block, Steven Landsburg, Donald Boudreaux, Daniel Klein, Peter Boettke, David Levy, David Boas, Ian Vasquez, Price Fishback, John Wallis, Robert Higgs, and David Friedman (*files*), has been to eschew religion and to take Liberty itself as the god term. (Many of my dear, female, American friends in the Liberty Movement, such as Karen Vaughan and Emily Chamlee-Wirght and Sandra Peart, are like me *not* anti-religious). I agree with most of the implications my friends draw from the rule of such a god. An adultist worshiping of Liberty commonly does lead to human flourishing for both poor and rich. I will presently tell you how. But such a liberalism—seeking liberty but lacking the One True God, *Allah*, *Yahweh*—fails to answer the overwhelming question: So what? *Et alors?* *¿Y qué?* *Nou en?*

An answer to "So what?" modifies the working of secular liberty. Without an answer, a human can easily devolve into an instrumental vending machine, fueled in populist style by soul-eroding resentments. If by contrast a Christian God is our telos, then such a commitment to loving our neighbor and even our enemy supervenes, elevating former slaves and former masters, both. Frederick Douglas in such a faith would forgive Thomas Auld and Edward Covey. And Auld and Cover would confess their sin of coercive mastery. The Dutch economist Arjo Klamer in a secular vein calls it simply "doing the right thing."²² But Arjo struggles with the fundament, the reply to *Nou en?* Beyond prudence alone, that is, the other virtues of love, justice, temperance, courage, hope, and faith come to matter to humans, as they appear to matter to Our Lord crafting our souls. "High moral principles, "as Mamali calls them, are not optional in human flourishing unto salvation, in this life or in the next.

I do recognize the theological dilemma of whether God is good because virtuous, which would make God dependent on human notions of virtue; in particular the notions of one-life mortals; or whether virtue is good because God anyway commands it, which would make the virtuous believing humans into dependent children, besides making virtues entirely arbitrary. It is the same dilemma in constitutional government. Is a law good because the Constitution says so, or is the Constitution to be justified by natural law, in which case its clauses are unnecessary?²³ Is *dharma* good because of its personal or social consequences or because it simply is? I have no snappy solution to such dilemmas, which places me with all the others who have recognized it.

A Christian who is over-confident of his salvation is liable to exhibit a pagan god's indifference to virtues. Why exhibit courage, for example, if one is deathless? It would make martyrdom easy, as it appears to

22 Klamer, Arjo. 2017. *Doing the Right Thing: A Value Based Economy*. London: Ubiquity Press.

23 See McCloskey on Fletcher v. Peck.

be for the tiny group of Moslems willing to strap themselves to bombs and kill children, rather in the way the large group of Christians have been willing to do. For a pagan god the virtues of temperance and hope and justice and even love would also lack point.

But at least one can say that our God wishes the good however defined for the souls of his creatures called humans, which is the core claim of Abrahamic religions. On the available evidence, liberalism not tyranny, and markets not coercions, and eventual adulthood not perpetual childhood, turn out to be the best ways among humans for fulfilling God's wish. Or so a liberalist Christian says.



I address here mainly the Christians, pastors, and theologians now suspicious of an economically liberalist Christianity. Their name is Legion, for they are many, especially in progressive Christian circles. True, many of my beloved social democratic friends say they accept *some* markets. They better, eagerly patronizing Trader Joe's and buying on Amazon.com. But then they claim to have further a "nuanced," middling view of socialism versus "capitalism." It would be like claiming that a "nuanced" view of Christianity would be to split the difference between God and Satan. They speak warmly of the "mixed economy," or "market socialism," constructions of contradiction long touted by New Liberals and Euro-communists. It sounds judicious. But it merely splits the difference between liberty and tyranny. Let's have state tyranny, as in the distributist proposals of Pope Leo XIII, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Dorothy Day, Pascal-Emmanuel Gorbey, and Pope Francis. My New-Liberal friends, in the next and justificatory sentence after delcating that they are nuanced, exhibit a belief, against the scientific evidence, that the market works exceptionally poorly, and a belief, also against the scientific evidence, that the state with the guidance of the church or the economists works exceptionally well. Oh, my dear, dear friends, do reconsider.

Likewise, the modern Christian evangelical and Jewish orthodox and Muslim fundamentalist—mostly not so much my friends, though God bless them, too—are often by contrast cordial towards *laissez faire* in commerce. But they are notably less cordial towards other liberties, especially for other people, such as women or gays or Blacks. Look at the American versions of the radically religious ever since, during the 1970s, they first gave up their quietism, and entered politics with a bang. American Black pastors had done so twenty years earlier. White Southern Baptists decided to give a reply, as did ultra-orthodox rabbis replying to Israel's founding cultural liberalism.

To both groups of believers, to my "liberal" or socialist friends, and to my conservative not-so-much friends, I say: think it possible you may be mistaken. Liberty is liberty is liberty, supported by God's material and spiritual economy.

The little band of fellow theists who do also accept economic true liberalism, such as my friends Israel Kirzner, Paul Oslington, P. J. Hill, Larry Iannaccone, the late Don Lavoie, and the late Robert Nelson, maybe will find here a few additional reasons *contra gentiles*. And maybe open-minded, believing Jews or Moslems or Buddhists or other faithful will find reasons to urge liberalism in their own faiths, as my friend and colleague at the Cato Institute, Mustafa Akyol, does for Islam so persuasively.²⁴

Sadly, most of my academic colleagues and friends in the humanities and social sciences are proudly non-believing, having been stoutly atheistic since the very wise age of 14. In the United States, further, most of them, since that other very wise age of 21, would call themselves "liberals." I wish to persuade them that they are less than wise in their anti-faith faith and in their anti-liberal liberalism, and that they need to become wiser on both counts. Alas, most of my economically wise, true-liberal allies at the Cato Institute and

24 Akyol, Mustafa. 2011. *Islam Without Extremes*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; 2021a. *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance*. London: St. Martin's Press; 2021b. *Why, As A Muslim, I Defend Liberty*. Washington DC: Cato Institute.

elsewhere are also atheistic, from that same age of 14. (All of which explains, you see, why I don't have any friends).

I pray that all of you—you “liberals” and you liberals—will rethink how the universe, human consciousness, and human liberty of the will could have arisen. Hint: a stony materialism might not suffice.



That is, I claim as an economist and historian, and as a late-life convert to Christianity, to have a good deal to tell you—all about the economics and history relevant to the issue at hand. I will tell you about the economics and the economic history chiefly out of my own mouth and mind and my own claim, well justified I assure you, to professional authority. But for the theology and political philosophy I depend upon others, and quote them frequently. The appeal to the authority of others will become I fear a little tiresome. I apologize. Yet the argument /explanation requires it, because an amateur such as I am in theology and political philosophy is trying to persuade professionals in fields in which she cannot claim expertise.

And you will soon spot, if you have not already, my imperfect grasp even of the large modern conversation about the relationship between Christian faith and liberal economics. I have observed, and have been informed querulously by my critics, that many progressive theologians regard themselves as “liberals.” They must mean something lovely by the word. But I can only report what has been my repeated experience over the past few decades in talking with and reading the writings of progressive and conservative theologians, pastors, and lay Christians when the economy and economics and economic history come up—namely, their unease, astonishment, even outrage when I make in reply the most elementary and scientifically solid points out of a true economic liberalism. By “true” I mean scientifically grounded, critically self-conscious, skeptical of bumper stickers and headlines, ethically serious yet knowing the factual score. I say things like, “Trade is mutually beneficial.” Denial. “National income is national expenditure.” Bored incomprehension. “People are not always idiotic.” Indignant citation of the 250-odd cognitive biases asserted in social psychology. “When they ate idiotic, entry and exit of firms often saves them.” Indignant claim that the invisible hand is mere mysticism. “Externalities have been claimed but not measured.” Indignant citation of econometrics is beside the point. “States are not staffed by philosopher kings.” Indigent accusations that I am a terrible cynic. “Markets are ancient.” Indignant accusations that I must not know the conventional wisdom learned at school. The anti-liberal liberals have a whole lot of indignation. Not so much logic and evidence.

Yet if Christianity is improved by a true liberalism, as I said the serious game here may be worth the candle. If true liberalism is improved by Christianity, likewise. The stake is human salvation, here and beyond—or as Frank Fukuyama puts it in secular terms, the end of history.²⁵ A Victorian atheist proposed that every church door should have a large sign saying, “Important If True.” Liberalist Christianity and Christian liberalism are surely important, if true. Testing such important propositions seems worth risking a good many tiresome and amateurish passages.

I beg for your patience, then, on the grounds Rabbi Tafron articulated, in Hillel's version: “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” He also said, “The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, but the reward is great, and the master of the house is knocking.”²⁶ Or as a later rabbi said, reported in Matthew 9:37, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Let me at least try, so great is the reward and so plentiful the harvest from a serious and sensible inquiry into God's purposes in the modern economy.

25 Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press. My defense of his argument is in McCloskey, D. N. 2019. *Why Liberalism Works: How True Liberal Values Produce a Freer, More Equal, Prosperous World for All*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

26 Pirkei Avot 2:15-16. I thank Joel Mokyr for helping me track it down. A version of it was used by Henry Rosovsky as the motto for a festschrift for the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron.

The book will require another sort of patience, though, aside from my clumsy and ignorant forays into theology and political philosophy. Namely: the product, as you will already have seen, is not exactly beach reading. Wait for some cold, quiet evenings in winter. The logic and evidence are sometimes intricate. Often, I fear, my earnest attempts at scientific accuracy combined with rhetorical lucidity will fail. True, the book does not trouble you with technical economics, or much even of the details of history. I scribble away elsewhere in both genres, but here I stick to arguments and evidence that an interested (and admirably patient and open-minded) outsider to professional economics and professional history might find perspicuous.

I do suppose, though, that you will properly scorn going to the other extreme, and resting easy with populist bumper-stickers of left or right. “Tax corporations, not people.” “Hang the bankers.” “Capitalism is Protestant.” “Jesus was a salesman.” “God promises me to have a Cadillac.” Nor do you not want I suppose to adopt the convenient supposition that the true liberalism of Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill or Milton Friedman or for that matter Deirdre Nansen McCloskey is easy to refute, a tissue of factual and logical absurdities, and therefore its advocates must be evil or morons or in the pay of dark money, or all three. I instead suppose you want to hear the best case for a liberalist Christianity and for a Christian liberalism, or at any rate a pretty good one, not the loony worst. Then you can compare it with the best opposite case—also assessed here, though not very sympathetically—for Christian socialism and secular regulation and ubiquitous coercion in aid of the general will. Therefore, I again beg of you a certain patience.

Still another patience-need—they’re piling up, aren’t they?—is that if you start with the other opinion, whether on economics or on theology, the case for liberalist Christianity and Christian liberalism will often be startling, even irritating. “How can she believe *that!*” No one likes to be startled or irritated by being told that his settled opinion is mistaken. Modern psychology and ancient literature attest that the experience commonly arouses merely defensiveness in the auditor, if he can hear it at all, and that it seldom changes his mind. As Abe Lincoln, wise beyond his 33 years, said in an address to the temperance society of Springfield, Illinois in 1842, “If you would win a man to your cause first convince him that you are his sincere friend. On the contrary, assume to dictate to his judgment, or to command his action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised, and he will retreat within himself.”²⁷ I assure you that I am your sincere friend, and beg of your forgiveness if I occasionally slip into dictating to your judgment.

Most otherwise learned and intelligent people, often calling themselves “liberals” and “Christians,” stand astonished. They accuse me loudly: “You are not nuanced, balanced, middling.” By this they seem to mean that there must be *something* in statism, so popular has it been since it replaced the cynical yet realistic conviction of most citizens before the Liberty Movement took hold, that governments were in fact established for the glory of kings and the profit of oligarchs. When such learned and intelligent moderns reject indignantly my liberal scientific evidence, I reply patiently that perhaps there is nothing “nuanced” about denying that water does run downhill, or that voluntary trade does benefit both sides, or that God does want us to be liberated adults.

I have concluded from the experience—I hope you can show me I am mistaken about it; but I’ll need to see the evidence—that most Christians, and even the more thoughtful among them, have a feeble grasp, comparable I suppose in quality to mine of theology, of how a modern economy works. This does not, I admit, distinguish them from most people, fish swimming in water they cannot sense.

Yet here I stand. As a professional economist and historian, and an embarrassingly amateur theologian and political philosopher, I can do no other than give you some of the more important intricacies illuminating the question of what God has to do with the economy, and even some of the irritations. *Gott helfe mir.*

By way of truth in advertising let me say at the outset, irritatingly I suppose yet by now wholly unsurprisingly, that I am assuredly what I have been calling a “true” liberal, that is, a follower of Smith, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Mill, Spencer, Jane Jacobs, James Buchanan, Wendy McElroy, and, yes, Friedman. In such matters I am not wishy-washy, as the sweet Catholic social teachers and the sweet preachers of the Protestant social gospel and the sweet social democratic atheists do tend to be. I love them all dearly, but sharply dis-

27 Lincoln 1842.

agree with them, and can do no other. I oppose all physical coercion except to prevent it, and oppose it even if exercised under cover of the general will, excepting only the handful of cases of catastrophic emergencies. And I am a fierce egalitarian, believing in strict equality of permission, as of souls, and the dignity of everyone. I advocate love, not hate/Things to do/It's getting late/We're all brothers/And are only passing through. I believe further that a good community should be the outcome of individual love and choice, not collectively enforced appeals to that imagined general will. I believe for example that the virtue of justice is a matter of each person's choice, not a collective guilt to be enforced by the state. Liberty of the will to choose sin or salvation should not be generalized by group, to condemn the Judeans "because they killed Christ" or to condemn the businesspeople "because they gouge in pricing" or to condemn "the iniquity of the fathers [and bring punishment] upon the children, and upon ... the fourth generation of them that hate me." Understand, my dear wishy-washy friends who call yourself liberal and Christian yet do not grant everyone liberty of permission, that for adults I support a liberty of loving, a liberty of contracting, a liberty of trade, a liberty of migration, a liberty to consume drugs, a liberty of professions, a liberty of property, a liberty of monetary affairs. And I would make numerous other startling and irritating proposals, such as a liberty of gender choice and a liberty in a woman's right to choose, in aid of a truly liberal society—all of them part of the Liberty Movement that made the modern world. I readily admit that many of the proposals are "impractical," if that means that they are unlikely soon to pass Congress and get the President's signature. But even as proposals they might serve to persuade us to stop digging, considering that we are presently at the bottom of a deep and deepening statist hole.

You will resist, and you should. You are right to be skeptical. There are many opinions circulating in the world, most of them not well grounded, or plain bonkers. Watch out. Consider soberly what you know, really know.

Yet especially consider with a proper Christian humility what you don't really do know. Josh Billings, an American humorist contemporary with Mark Twain, said, in one of several versions of the thought, "It ain't what you don't know that hurts you. It's what you know that ain't so." For example, you know that life was not so very bad in merry Robin Hood's day, that peasants then were primitive communists, that possessive individualism arose during the 16th century, that "capitalism" is new, that Calvinism explains it, that saving more and working harder explains "capitalist" enrichment, that material causes not the new liberal idea made us rich, that the riches are dubiously beneficial because accompanied by environmental degradation, that we therefore face an existential crisis, that debt is exploitation, that enclosure in English agriculture drove peasants into the arms of factory owners, that during the Industrial Revolution the workers were exploited, that Europe grew rich by stealing from the colonies, that slavery caused "capitalism," that Europeans were the main profiteers from the slave trade, that enslaved labor was free of cost to the purchasers of enslaved people, that we are all anyway wage slaves to the bosses, that the bosses have gold piled in the backroom we can expropriate without limit for higher wages and better working conditions, that unionization and regulation therefore greatly improved our condition, that protection from foreign competition helps the average American, that withholding Federal lands from private sale was America's best idea, that businesses engage in planned obsolescence, that corporate taxes fall wholly on rich stockholders, that advertising manipulates us foolish consumers in the grip of consumerism, that monopoly is increasing, that natural resources are the basis of a modern economy, that rising population is a big problem, that declining population is a big problem, that capital accumulation is how economic growth happened, that most of the gain of economic growth went to the bosses, that "capitalism" caused inequality, that only financial capital is capital, that inequality of capital ownership has increased, that the U.K. has failed economically since 1900, that the U.S.A. faces an economic threat from China, that most businesspeople are thieves, that inflation is caused by the greed of businesspeople, that the system in which they work is evil, that therefore we need a radically new system, that "neo-liberalism" has made the poor poorer, and that markets, unlike the modern state which so wisely regulates markets with the help of wise economists, have very, very many and grave imperfections. Each one of these facts you know to be true has been shown to be at best scientifically dubious or, mostly, plain bonkers. They ain't so.

Still you resist the truths of economics and economic history, and therefore true liberalism, perhaps because the erroneous tales support your sacred identity as a pious Christian who cares very deeply about the poor. Or perhaps you believe the tales because they support the politics you came to favor at age 21, which has now become your sacred identity. That belief in such tales, considered sorely in view of its actual effects instead of its lovely intentions, have damaged the poor, and have underlain the worst tyrannies in history, and have denied Christian truths, is not something that you know, or will readily accept even if some sincere friend points it out to you. Yet I beg you to open your mind and consider the possibility that much of what you know about the economy and economic history and economic policy ain't so. Realizing it, I promise as your sincerest friend, will improve your faith and your politics.

The atheists I have less hope of persuading. The attacks by the New Atheists are similar to those, I have noted, of that spirited adolescent boy, age 14, who reckons that he's pretty clever to deny God, against the *rubbish* of his *stupid* parents and teachers. The political philosopher and conservative Episcopalian J. Budziszewski describes his own callow rebellion: "Like Nietzsche, I imagined myself one of the few who could believe such things—who could walk the rocky heights where the air is thin and cold." The New Atheists would do well to look into the theological notion of spiritual pride. In a *New Yorker* cartoon two monks are walking in the cloister. One exclaims, "But I *am* holier than thou!"—and Satan swoops in at the last to claim his soul.

The New Atheists do not approach their own angry faith by reading books that might possibly challenge it, and especially not books about theology, whether amateur or professional. Look at the bibliographies in Dawkins' books. After all, why read J. Budziszewski, John Polkinghorne, David Bentley Hart, David Klemm, Jean Bethke Elshtain, or William Schweiker—not to speak of John Henry Cardinal Newman of Dublin or Julian of Norwich or Thomas of Aquino or Augustine of Hippo—when you know at the outset that it's all *stupid rubbish*?

Yet in humility, I say to my dear, dear fellow Christians, judge not that you may not be judged. And to my dear atheist friends, do listen to such good advice. During Oliver Cromwell's invasion of Scotland he tried one last time to persuade the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to give up on royal Charles II hiding out in France after his father had been beheaded: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." Beware, my friends, that you do not suppose prematurely, before you know the elementary logic and evidence for liberalism, that the economic part is merely stupid rubbish. It may be. Let us think it possible. We should all be open to the hypothesis that it is. But to find out, I think you will agree, would require a good deal of reading and reflection—beyond, say, the editorial page in the parish newsletter for the herd of independent minds, or even *The Economist* written by fluent British youngsters.

It's wise to give up especially the untutored conviction that you already know all there is to know about the relation between faith and prudence. You would not say so about Greek philology, probably, or nuclear physics, surely. Systematic economics is no easier than Greek grammar or quantum mechanics or systematic theology. It cannot be reduced to, say, your daily experience in the economy. Nor, at a more academic level, can it be reduced to a reading of an economics stopping at 1867, derived from a dazzled reading as an undergraduate of *Das Kapital*, confirmed by listening the David Harvey's eloquent on-line course during 2923, without subsequently reading with care of Marx's master, Adam Smith, or any of the other economics that came later than Marx. It would be like a fish supposing that because he swims in the ocean, and saw last night a popular show on fish-TV about the ocean, and reads religiously the oceanic version of *The New York Times*, that he is an expert judge of oceanography.

Think it possible, that is, that your settled moral sentiments against economic liberalism and in favor of economic statism might be mistaken. To cling to untested opinions on such an important matter is surely unwise. In 1859 John Stuart Mill used in *On Liberty* the debate over Christianity pro and con as his hard-case argument for liberty of speech. He might as well have used the debate then just begun over economic liberalism and in favor of a new statism. Without knowing the other side, he wrote,

[even a] true opinion abides in the mind, but abides as a prejudice, a belief independent of, and proof against, argument—this is not the way in which truth ought to be held by a rational being ... He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that ... [The dogmatists] have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess ... Instead of a vivid conception and a living belief, there remain only a few phrases retained by rote. ... The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful, is the cause of half their errors.²⁸

The philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty once spoke of the habit of intellectual humility, which we all should practice. Such humility is rare among experts and ideologues eager to speak but reluctant to listen. What is crucial, she wrote, is “our ability to engage in continuous conversation, testing one another, discovering our hidden presumptions, changing our minds because we have listened to the voices of our fellows. Lunatics also change their minds, but their minds change with the tides of the moon and not because they have listened, really listened, to their friends’ questions and objections.”²⁹ I carry this motto on a card in my purse, to accuse myself on the too-frequent occasions in which I do not follow it. And I recently learned that the great faith-man Thomas Merton wrote similarly, in various places much quoted on websites, though seldom changing anyone’s behavior in debate: “If I insist on giving you my truth, and never stop to receive your truth in return, there can be no truth between us.”³⁰ A second purse card.

Even if we at first believe we disagree, then, let us converse, the better to discern the Christian and economic truth between us.³¹

28 Mill 1859, pp. 65, 67, 68, 72, 80.

29 Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg. 1983. Experiments in Philosophical Genre: Descartes’ Meditations. *Critical Inquiry* 9:545-565.

30 The sentence is from *The Waters of Siloe*, 1949, and reprinted in numerous of his collections.

31 The editor of C+T acknowledges that some of Professor McCloskey’s notes might have been incorrectly rendered.