

Colloquī

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A journal for restless minds

Common Nonsense

An unholy trinity in its rising

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Common Nonsense

An unholy trinity in its rising

Common Sense, a pamphlet written in clear and persuasive prose in the waning moments of the year 1775, marshaled moral and political arguments for common people to rise up in defense of individual liberty and freedom from religious oppression and tyranny. To the founders of this great nation, religion and religious liberty were indispensable to establishing and sustaining a free society; limiting government while providing individuals with the freedom to make the best of such opportune moments as should become available to them.

James Madison, 4th President of the United States, described religious liberty as "a right towards men" but "a duty

towards the Creator," and a "duty ... precedent both in order of time and degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society." In his 1785 pamphlet, "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," he enumerated the reasons why the bill in question must be defeated.

In
God
We
Trust

Because we hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, "that Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence." The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of

every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right

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It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society, who enters into any subordinate Association, must always do it with a reservation of his duty to the General Authority; much more must every man who becomes a member of any particular Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign.

The founding fathers were practical statesmen, who, though not all were Christian, all believed fervently in a higher power, a "Governour of the Universe." They knew well and truly understood that individuals had both the potential for good as well as the capacity for evil; that no society could long endure without the means to restrain the powerful passions and baser appetites constitutive of human nature. From their own experiences they knew too great a reliance on the coercive power of government would ultimately meet with tyranny and no liberty; but they also understood the equally dangerous tyranny that would come about from the unrestrained pursuit of personal appetites at the expense of the common good, were individuals enslaved to their own appetites and passions.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797), a prominent Anglo-Irish statesman, philosopher, and member of parliament,

was a proponent of underpinning virtues with manners in society and of the importance of religious institutions for the moral stability and good of the state.

Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put chains upon their appetites.... Society cannot exist unless a controlling power be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.

As Attorney General William Barr noted in recent remarks delivered to the faculty and students of the Law School at the University of Notre Dame¹ on the centrality of religion and religious liberty in the United States, "... the Founders decided to take a gamble. They called it a great experiment."

They would leave "the People" broad liberty, limit the coercive power of the government, and place their trust in self-discipline and the virtue of the American people. In the words of Madison, "We have staked our future on the ability of each of us to govern ourselves..."

This is really what was meant by "self-government." It did not mean primarily the mechanics by which we select a representative legislative body. It referred to the capacity of each individual to restrain and govern themselves.

But what was the source of this internal controlling power? In a free republic, those restraints could not be handed down from above by philosopher kings.

Instead, social order must flow up from the people themselves – freely obeying the dictates of inwardly-

possessed and commonly-shared moral values. And to control willful human beings, with an infinite capacity to rationalize, those moral values must rest on authority independent of men's will – they must flow from a transcendent Supreme Being.

In short, in the Framers' view, free government was only suitable and sustainable for a religious people – a people who recognized that there was a transcendent moral order antecedent to both the state and man-made law and who had the discipline to control themselves according to those enduring principles.

As John Adams put it, "We have no government armed with the power which is capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. **Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.**" *[emphasis added]* As Father John Courtney Murray observed, the American tenet was not that: "Free government is inevitable, only that it is possible, and that its possibility can be realized only when the people as a whole are inwardly governed by the recognized imperatives of the universal moral order."

How does religion promote the moral discipline and virtue needed to support free government? First, it gives us the right rules to live by. The Founding generation were Christians. They believed that the Judeo-Christian moral system corresponds to the true nature of man. Those moral precepts start with the two great commandments—to Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind; and to Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself. But they also include the guidance of natural law—a real, transcendent moral order which flows from God's eternal law—the

divine wisdom by which the whole of creation is ordered. The eternal law is impressed upon, and reflected in, all created things. From the nature of things we can, through reason, experience, discern standards of right and wrong that exist independent of human will. Modern secularists dismiss this idea of morality as other-worldly superstition imposed by a kill-joy clergy. In fact, Judeo-Christian moral standards are the ultimate utilitarian rules for human conduct. They reflect the rules that are best for man, not in the by and by, but in the here and now. They are like God's instruction manual for the best running of man and human society. By the same token, violations of these moral laws have bad, real-world consequences for man and society. We may not pay the price immediately, but over time the harm is real.

Religion helps promote moral discipline within society. Because man is fallen, we don't automatically conform ourselves to moral rules even when we know they are good for us. But religion helps teach, train, and habituate people to want what is good. It does not do this primarily by formal laws – that is, through coercion. It does this through moral education and by informing society's informal rules – its customs and traditions which reflect the wisdom and experience of the ages. In other words, religion helps frame moral culture within society that instills and reinforces moral discipline.

The Attorney General goes on to speak of the increasing anti-religious sentiment over the past half-century or so, exemplified by

steady erosion of traditional Judeo-Christian mores and the comprehensive effort to drive religion from the public square. At the same time, secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism have largely overshadowed religious sentiment, and this moral upheaval has had disastrous consequences. "Virtually every measure of social pathology continues to gain ground."

Among these militant secularists are many so-called "progressives." But where is the progress?

In 1965, the illegitimacy rate was eight percent. In 1992, when I was last Attorney General, it was 25 percent. Today it is over 40 percent. In many of our large urban areas, it is around 70 percent.

Along with the wreckage of the family, we are seeing record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence, and a deadly drug epidemic. As you all know, over 70,000 people die a year from drug overdoses. That is more casualties in a year than we experienced during the entire Vietnam War.

I will not dwell on all the bitter results of the new secular age. Suffice it to say that the campaign to destroy the traditional moral order has brought with it immense suffering, wreckage, and misery. And yet,

the forces of secularism, ignoring these tragic results, press on with even greater militancy.

The Attorney General added, but then asked, "Among these militant secularists are many so-called 'progressives.' But where is the progress?"

We are told we are living in a post-Christian era. But what has replaced the Judeo-Christian moral system? What is it that can fill the spiritual void in the hearts of the individual person? And what is a system of values that can sustain human social life? The fact is that no secular creed has emerged capable of performing the role of religion. Scholarship suggests that religion has been integral to the development and thriving of Homo sapiens since we emerged roughly 50,000 years ago.

It is just for the past few hundred years we have experimented in living without religion.

We hear much today about our humane values. But, in the final analysis, what undergirds these values? What commands our adherence to them? What we call "values" today are really nothing more than mere sentimentality, still drawing on the vapor trails of Christianity.

Never before has religion been assailed by such overwhelming and comprehensive forces; religion is not in decline, it is not in decay, it is being assaulted by secularists and their allies intent on its total destruction. Secular "progressives" have marshalled their armies, their forces of mass communication, popular culture, entertainment, technology, and academia in in order

to unremittently destroy religion and its traditional moral values. "These instruments are used not only to affirmatively promote secular orthodoxy, but also drown out and silence opposing voices, and to attack viciously and hold up to ridicule any dissenters."

One of the ironies, as some have observed, is that the secular project has itself become a religion, pursued with religious fervor. It is taking on all the trappings of a religion, including inquisitions and excommunication. Those who defy the creed risk a figurative burning at the stake – social, educational, and professional ostracism and exclusion waged through lawsuits and savage social media campaigns.

The pervasiveness and power of our high-tech popular culture fuels apostasy in another way. It provides an unprecedented degree of distraction. Part of the human condition is that there are big questions that should stare us in the face. Are we created or are we purely material accidents? Does our life have any meaning or purpose? But, as Blaise Pascal observed, instead of grappling with these questions, humans can be easily distracted from thinking about the "final things." Indeed, we now live in the age of distraction where we can envelop ourselves in a world of digital stimulation and universal connectivity. And we have almost limitless ways of indulging all our physical appetites.

There is another modern phenomenon that suppresses society's self-corrective mechanisms – that makes it harder for society to restore itself. In the past, when societies are threatened by moral chaos, the

overall social costs of licentiousness and irresponsible personal conduct becomes so high that society ultimately recoils and reevaluates the path that it is on. But today – in the face of all the increasing pathologies – instead of addressing the underlying cause, we have the State in the role of alleviator of bad consequences. We call on the State to mitigate the social costs of personal misconduct and irresponsibility.

- So the reaction to growing illegitimacy is not sexual responsibility, but abortion.
- The reaction to drug addiction is safe injection sites.
- The solution to the breakdown of the family is for the State to set itself up as the ersatz husband for single mothers and the ersatz father to their children.

The problem is not that religion is being forced on others. The problem is that irreligion and secular values are being forced on people of faith.

The call comes for more and more social programs to deal with the wreckage. While we think we are solving problems, we are underwriting them. We start with an untrammelled freedom and we end up as dependents of a coercive state on which we depend.

Interestingly, this idea of the State as the alleviator of bad consequences has given rise to a new moral system that goes hand-in-hand with the secularization of society. It can be called the system of "macro-

morality." It is in some ways an inversion of Christian morality. Christianity teaches a micro-morality. We transform the world by focusing on our own personal morality and transformation.

The new secular religion teaches macro-morality. One's morality is not gauged by their private conduct, but rather on their commitment to political causes and collective action to address social problems. This system allows us to not worry so much about the strictures on our private lives, while we find salvation on the picket-line. We can signal our finely-tuned moral sensibilities by demonstrating for this cause or that.

And then there is another weapon, the way secular progressives have weaponized the law, using it "as a battering ram to break down traditional moral values and to establish moral relativism as a new orthodoxy." As the Attorney General goes on to say, the law is and has been used as a weapon against religion in a couple of ways.

First, either through legislation but more frequently through judicial interpretation, secularists have been continually seeking to eliminate laws that reflect traditional moral norms.

At first, this involved rolling back laws that prohibited certain kinds of conduct. Thus, the watershed decision legalizing abortion. And since then, the legalization of euthanasia. The list goes on.

More recently, we have seen the law used aggressively to force religious people and entities to subscribe to practices and policies that are antithetical to their faith.

The problem is not that religion is being forced on others. The problem is that irreligion and secular values are being forced on people of faith.

... militant secularists today do not have a live and let live spirit—they are not content to leave religious people alone to practice their faith. Instead, they seem to take delight in compelling people to violate their conscience.

This refusal to accommodate the free exercise of religion is relatively recent. Just 25 years ago, there was broad consensus in our society that our laws should accommodate religious belief. In 1993, Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act – RFRA. The purpose of the statute was to promote maximum accommodation to religion when the government adopted broad policies that could impinge on religious practice. At the time, RFRA was not controversial. It was introduced by Chuck Schumer with 170 cosponsors in the House, and was introduced by Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch with 59 additional cosponsors in the Senate. It passed by voice vote in the House and by a vote of 97-3 in the Senate. Recently, as the process of secularization has accelerated, RFRA has come under assault, and the idea of religious accommodation has fallen out of favor.

Strange how life ebbs and flows, how things come together adding something new and unexpected, multiplying the regard of each with devastating effect. Ground zero. It is too easy to be complacent, much too easy to disempower the raw emotions, much, much too easy to ignore the gaping wounds sitting in your easy-chair three-thousand miles away. There is a point here which I will make; have patience, for it is im-

portant.

This week I met a lady, tall and copper green she stood as she had for all these many years. I climbed the 196 steps to stand before her feet and gaze upon her golden lamp for the first time in my lifetime. It was far more than well worth the effort. I fell in love again.

A day before I walked among the universal throng over hallowed ground. Ground Zero. It changed me; how could it not! Tread softly in silent mourning at walls of fond remembrance; row on row of souls I never knew but now may not forget. Their faces etched on stone that fills my soul with such intensity as the ancient poet's rhyme:

**NO DAY SHALL ERASE YOU
FROM THE MEMORY OF TIME.**

- Virgil

One final gift. Last evening, Friday. Packed within the upper seats off-Broadway and the musical *Come From Away*, of the small Newfoundland town of Gander who welcomed 7,000 strangers from around the world into their homes and their lives after the terrible events of 9/11. It made the heart sing and the soul soar. It was beautifully made.

And yet, it was Ground Zero which stabbed the heart so merciless, the cold cruel rage of man for man, man's apostasy for by happenstance being human. Some may suggest no connection between one extreme and another, but a circle has no end; round and round it goes forever. It is a matter of degrees: zero eventually comes up on itself.

Ground zero for these attacks on religion are the schools. To me, this is the most serious challenge to religious liberty. For anyone who has a religious faith, by far the most important part of exercising that faith is the teaching of that religion to our children. The passing on of the faith. There is no greater gift we can give our children and no greater expression of love.

For the government to interfere in that process is a monstrous invasion of religious liberty. Yet here is where the battle is being joined, and I see the secularists are attacking on three fronts.

The first front relates to the content of public school curriculum. Many states are adopting curriculum that is incompatible with traditional religious principles according to which parents are attempting to raise their children. They often do so without any opt out for religious families. Thus, for example, New Jersey recently passed a law requiring public schools to adopt an LGBT curriculum that many feel is inconsistent with traditional Christian teaching. Similar laws have been passed in California and Illinois. And the Orange County Board of Education in California issued an opinion that "parents who disagree with the instructional materials related to gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation may not excuse their children from this instruction."

Indeed, in some cases, the schools may not even warn parents about lessons they plan to teach on controversial subjects relating to sexual behavior and relationships. This puts parents who dissent from the secular orthodoxy to a difficult choice: Try to scrape together the money for private school or home schooling, or allow their children to be inculcated with messages they fundamentally reject.

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A second axis of attack in the realm of education are state policies designed to starve religious schools of generally-available funds and encouraging students to choose secular options. Montana, for example, created a program that provided tax credits to those who donated to a scholarship program that underprivileged students could use to attend private school. The point of the program was to provide greater parental and student choice in education and to provide better educations to needy youth. But Montana expressly excluded religiously-affiliated private schools from the program. And when that exclusion was challenged in court by parents who wanted to use the scholarships to attend a nondenominational Christian school, the Montana Supreme Court required the state to eliminate the program rather than allow parents to use scholarships for religious schools. It justified this action by pointing to a provision in Montana's State Constitution commonly referred to as a "Blaine Amendment." Blaine Amendments were passed at a time of rampant anti-Catholic animus in this country, and typically disqualify religious institutions from receiving any direct or indirect payments from a state's funds. The case is now in the Supreme Court, and we filed a brief explaining why Montana's Blaine Amendment violates the First Amendment.

A third kind of assault on religious freedom in education have been recent efforts to use state laws to force religious schools to adhere to secular orthodoxy. For example, right here in Indiana, a teacher sued the Catholic Archbishop of Indianapolis for directing the Catholic schools within his diocese that they could not employ teachers in same-sex marriages because the example of those same-sex marriages would undermine the schools' teaching on the Catholic view of marriage and

complementarity between the sexes. This lawsuit clearly infringes the First Amendment rights of the Archdiocese by interfering both with its expressive association and with its church autonomy. The Department of Justice filed a statement of interest in the state court making these points, and we hope that the state court will soon dismiss the case.

Taken together, these cases paint a disturbing picture. We see the State requiring local public schools to insert themselves into contentious social debates, without regard for the religious views of their students or parents. In effect, these states are requiring local communities to make their public schools inhospitable to families with traditional religious values; those families are implicitly told that they should conform or leave. At the same time, pressure is placed on religious schools to abandon their religious convictions. Simply because of their religious character, they are starved of funds—students who would otherwise choose to attend them are told they may only receive scholarships if they turn their sights elsewhere. Simultaneously, they are threatened in tort and, eventually, will undoubtedly be threatened with denial of accreditation if they adhere to their religious character. If these measures are successful, those with religious convictions will become still more marginalized.

My apologies for the extensive citation of the Attorney General's remarks. I believe they are important, crucially important. If you are so inclined, which I sincerely hope you are, you can view the speech at [youtube.com/watch?v=IM87WMSrCWM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM87WMSrCWM); the transcript of his prepared remarks can be found at [justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-law-school-and-de-nicola-center-ethics](https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-remarks-law-school-and-de-nicola-center-ethics).

What should be becoming painfully obvious, if it has not as yet, is that common sense has become uncommonly uncommon, thoroughly and completely overcome with common nonsense. As previously noted, we have elevated the State to the almighty, the deliverer from our evils, the alleviator of bad consequences. "We call on the State to mitigate the social costs of personal misconduct and irresponsibility." We have done so for far too long and it is destroying us from within.

One of the most pernicious venues for our self-destructive madness comes from our disregard for the usurpation of the academy by progressive ideologues. That this has been going on for more than a half-century with our tacit if not outright approval is evermore apparent and tragic. It is also extremely dangerous. Generations of young minds have been indoctrinated by resentment-ridden, nihilistic ideologues whose mission is to undermine Christian societies which they consider corrupt, oppressive and "patriarchal."

You're supporting ideologues who claim that all truth is subjective; that all sex differences are socially constructed; and that Western imperialism is the sole source of all Third World problems. They are post-modernists, pushing progressive activism at a college near you.

They produce the mobs that violently shut down campus speakers; the language police who enshrine into law use of fabricated gender pronouns; and the deans whose livelihoods depend on madly rooting out discrimination where little or none exists.

Their thinking took hold in Western universities in the '60s and '70s, when the true believers of the radical left became the professors of today. And now we rack up education-related debt—not so that our children learn to think critically, write clearly, or speak properly, but so they can model their mentors' destructive agenda.

It's now possible to complete an English degree and never encounter Shakespeare—one of those dead white males whose works underlie our "society of oppression."

To understand and oppose the post-modernists, the ideas by which they orient themselves must be clearly identified.

First is their new unholy trinity of diversity, equity and inclusion. Diversity is defined not by opinion, but by race, ethnicity or sexual identity; equity is no longer the laudable goal of equality of opportunity, but the insistence on equality of outcome; and inclusion is the use of identity-based quotas to attain this misconceived state of equity.

All the classic rights of the West are to be considered secondary to these new values. Take, for example, freedom of speech—the very pillar of democracy. The post-modernists refuse to believe that people of good will can exchange ideas and reach consensus.

Their world is instead a Hobbesian nightmare of identity groups warring for power. They don't see ideas that run contrary to their ideology as simply incorrect. They see them as integral to the oppressive system they wish to supplant, and consider it a moral obligation to stifle and constrain their expression.

Second is rejection of the free market—of the very idea that free, voluntary trading benefits everyone. They won't acknowledge that capi-

talism has lifted up hundreds of millions of people so they can for the first time in history afford food, shelter, clothing, transportation—even entertainment and travel. Those classified as poor in the U.S. (and, increasingly, everywhere else) are able to meet their basic needs. Meanwhile, in once-prosperous Venezuela—until recently the poster-child of the campus radicals—the middle class lines up for toilet paper.

Third, and finally, are the politics of identity. Post-modernists don't believe in individuals. You're an exemplar of your race, sex, or sexual preference. You're also either a victim or an oppressor. No wrong can be done by anyone in the former group, and no good by the latter. Such ideas of victimization do nothing but justify the use of power and engender intergroup conflict.

All these concepts originated with Karl Marx.... Marx viewed the world as a gigantic class struggle—the bourgeoisie against the proletariat; the grasping rich against the desperate poor. But wherever his ideas were put into practice—in the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, to name just a few—whole economies failed, and tens of millions were killed. We fought a decades-long cold war to stop the spread of those murderous notions. But they're back, in the new guise of identity politics.

The corrupt ideas of the post-modern neo-Marxists should be consigned to the dustbin of history. Instead, we underwrite their continuance in the very institutions where the central ideas of the West should be transmitted across the generations.²

1. William P. Barr, Attorney General of the United States, Remarks on Religious Liberty delivered to the Law School and the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, Friday, October 11, 2019.
2. Jordan Peterson, "Dangerous People are Teaching Your Kids", PragerU.com.

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

Salvation

Michael Patrick Barber

Ignatius Press

2019, 189 pages.

Faith and Politics

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI)

Ignatius Press

2018, 269 pages.

The Day Is Now Far Spent

Robert Cardinal Sarah

Ignatius Press

2019, 350 pages.

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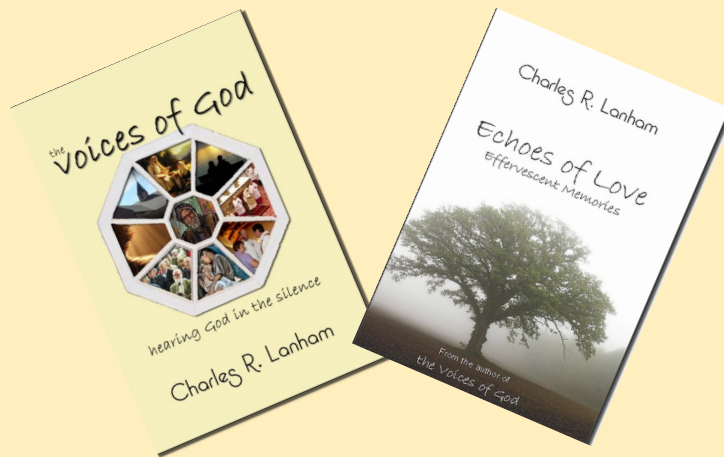
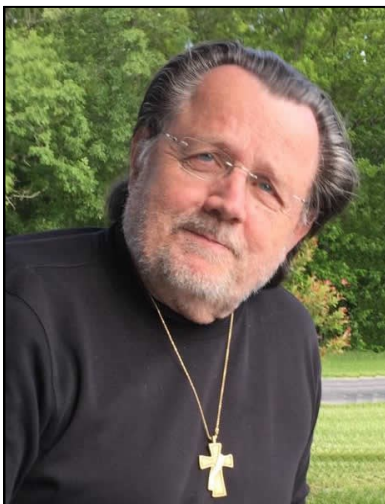
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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