

# Colloquī

June 08, 2019  
Volume 03, Number 43



A journal for restless minds

## Happiness Is Free

*Among the denizens on the flats*

**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.

## Happiness Is Free

*Among the denizens on the flats*

**T**he earth is gone flat and wobbly which goes to prove nothing but everything to the mad numen flatulently presiding there. Such self-conflatulation demands enthronement, preferring a permanent pleasure palace upon a perfectly petulant plateau. Such is the inarticulate prattle of the denizens on the flats, where floor and ceiling argue as to which holds the upper hand while walls shrink and melt like icing flowing down and compasses point due south which is oddly east for no discernible reason other than there is no west and north is on extended holiday.

The flatlands belong to no one and every one; happiness is free but unattainable; speech is free, but intolerable; life is free, but terminable; love is free, but per-

petually out of stock. Everything is, will and can be questioned, nothing is real; abnormality is normal; the oppressed oppress the oppressor—for justice: for whom they cannot nor dare not commit.

It is the age of “isms” where one must own one or two or risk being labeled sane. It matters not the prefix, for the key is on a union—followed by a quick divorce—never meant to be. Take for instance, the denizens on the flats,

renown for their zealous devotion to *Flatism*, the ideological doctrine, confirmed by virtually all mad scientists, that holds the earth has gone flat due to humans boring holes in the ground, causing an unexpected release of flatulence into the atmosphere. This sudden expulsion of noxious gas

resulted in the bubble, formerly known as global earth, bursting and going flat, thus causing the wobbly wobble which most concede will worsen over time.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

**M**ad numen abuse the hero,  
 abhor courage, abjure  
 Love; they levitate by  
 denigrating those who would dare  
 disparage their unholy creed. Above  
 all else, such madness belongs to those  
 beguiled by Nihilism's siren song, re-  
 jecting all thought of life having objec-  
 tive meaning, purpose or intrinsic val-  
 ue. Consequences hold no conse-  
 quence, life has no meaning, no pur-  
 pose beyond an itch just out of reach.  
 Sin is good; good is bad; bad is good  
 when sinfully bad; good is bad when  
 morality gets in the way.

Seduction, subversion, sedition—  
 these are the tools of a creature we  
 once called Satan, the Father of Lies,  
 the loser of the Battle in Heaven.  
 Yet he continues the fight here on  
 earth with the only weapons at his  
 disposal: man's inherent weakness-  
 es and zeal to be duped if the cause  
 seems appealing enough. Chief  
 among the weakness of Western  
 man today are his fundamental lack  
 of cultural self-confidence, his will-  
 ingness to open his ears to the siren  
 song of nihilism, a juvenile eager-  
 ness to believe the worst about him-  
 self and his society and to relish, on  
 some level, his own prospective  
 destruction.

Whether one views the combatants  
 in the struggle between God and  
 Satan ontologically, mythically or  
 literarily, God created man in his  
 own image and likeness but chose  
 to give him free will—a force so  
 powerful that not even God's infi-  
 nite love can always overcome it.  
 Thus given a sporting chance to  
 ruin God's favorites, the fallen  
 Light-Bringer, Lucifer, picked him-  
 self and his fellows off the floor of  
 the fiery lake into which they were  
 plunged by the sword of St. Mi-  
 chael, and endeavors each day not  
 to conquer Man but to seduce and

destroy him. As Satan observes in  
 Book One of Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

*The mind is its own place, and in itself  
 Can make a Heav'n of Hell, A Hell of Heav'n.  
 What matter where, if I be still the same ...  
 To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
 Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n.*

Satan himself, however, has no  
 need for servants in Hell, as God  
 does in Heaven; he is instead satis-  
 fied with corpses on earth.<sup>1</sup>

What the West has experienced  
 since the end of the Second World  
 War has been the erection of a mod-  
 ern Devil's Pleasure Palace, a Po-  
 temkin village built on promises of  
 "social justice" and equality for all,  
 on visions of a world at last di-  
 vorced from toil and sweat, where  
 every man and woman is guaran-  
 teed a living, a world without hun-  
 ger or want or cold or fear or racism  
 or sexism (or any of the many other  
 "isms" the Left is forever invent-  
 ing...

A world, in other words, that  
 sounds very much like Heaven. It is  
 a world promised us by Critical  
 Theory and by the principal figures  
 of the Frankfurt School. ... Instead,  
 as empirical evidence proclaims,  
 this world has become Hell. ... The  
 corpses of the untold millions who  
 have died in the attempts of the  
 literally Unholy Left to found the  
 Kingdom of Heaven here on earth,  
 divorced from God, surely testify.  
 Our pleasure palaces are many and  
 varied, ranging from the creature  
 comforts of modern civilization and  
 its nearly endless opportunities for  
 self-abnegating entertainment to  
 our gleeful, olly-olly-oxen-free abju-  
 ration of formal religion, and to our  
 false sense of enduring cultural  
 security, which was only partly  
 dented by the events of September  
 11, 2001.<sup>2</sup>

**T**here is a modern bigotry di-  
 rected toward ideas deemed  
 antiquated, especially when  
 compared against scientific advance-

ments in creature comforts.

**A**sk yourself, which is of  
 greater import: man's self-  
 awareness and self-  
 understanding studiously obtained  
 from absorbing the foundational phi-  
 losophies of the ancient Greeks, the  
 likes of Homer, Plato, Euripides and  
 Aristotle, along with the contributions  
 of the Church Fathers and Doctors of  
 the Church, Irenaeus, Origin, Jerome,  
 Athanasius, Anselm, Albert, Augus-  
 tine, Hildegard, Catherine, Aquinas  
 and others. Or, have advancements in  
 science achieved the greater good?  
 Surely, one would admit, technology  
 like the anything but so-called "smart"  
 phone, now a permanent attachment  
 to the hand of self-absorbed "woke"  
 idiots playing Candy Crush while  
 sexting and driving high on cannabis  
 in fits of violent rage, has been of far  
 greater import. If God has a forehead,  
 he must surely be banging it against  
 the walls of heaven, muttering to him-  
 self, "What was I thinking?"

It is common enough these days  
 for the "woke" denizens of flatland,  
 including their complicit propagand-  
 ists to rage against anyone and every-  
 one *sauf eux-mêmes*. "Woke" is the con-  
 cept (?) that *everything* must be inclu-  
 sive and inoffensive which makes for  
 mostly boring interchanges, especially  
 between the "woke" and the walking  
 dead—or is that the "unwoke"? The  
 "woke," sensitive to the sensibilities of  
 the hyper-sensitive offended, are utter-  
 ly tone-deaf when it comes to uttering  
 the overused F-bomb, which according  
 to the New Unabridged "Woke" Dic-  
 tionary may be used either as a verb, a  
 noun, an adverb or an adjective often

within what is therein described as a “woke” moment.

Admittedly, and quite comfortably I should add, I find myself unabashedly among the “unwoke” literati who take offense at the vulgar abuse—or, deservedly a more accurate indictment: *linguistic rape*—of the noble English language. I am offended but that is of no concern to the “woke” denizens of flatland. I suppose I lack sufficient rage to make too small a mountain out of their grotesque guttersnipe grammatics.

Working with people who are obviously *non compos mentis* is far less stressful than working with those who are only a *little* insane—who are “functional” in the world and know what sanity looks like, but use it as a tool for self-aggrandizement and the torment of others.

The great difficulty in communicating with people like this is that if you knew from the start they weren’t quite right, it would be easier to treat them with the deference one, for charity’s sake, gives the impaired. As it is, their madness is often discovered only some time after they pull you into it—to a depth corresponding with that of the doubt’s benefit you have already given them. All the while you were fooled into approaching them as entirely rational, but getting more and more heated at their amplifying outrages of rationality.

At a certain, often fairly advanced, point in the interchange, a mental switch flips and gives you the relief of moving the half-madman to a category in which he need no long be taken seriously, as someone to be approached well, therapeutically—which would drive him to *complete* insanity if he knew it had hap-

pened, for the half-crazy are proud spirits who cannot abide patronization.<sup>3</sup>

The Nobel Prize-winning author, Saul Bellow, in 1994 responded to the feigned outrage among the readers of the *New Yorker* over his arguably politically incorrect inquiries, “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d be glad to read him.” Note the sarcasm oozing from his response to those critics, to whom the hapless Spiro Agnew would have ascribed the epithet “effete intellectual snobs.”

The scandal is entirely journalistic in origin. Always foolishly trying to explain and edify all comers, I was speaking of the distinction between literate and preliterate societies. For I was once an anthropology student, you see. ... My critics, many of whom could not locate Papua New Guinea on the map, want to convict me of contempt for multiculturalism and defamation of the third world. I am an elderly white male—a Jew, to boot. Ideal for their purposes.

Righteousness and rage threaten the independence of our souls. Rage is now brilliantly prestigious. Rage is distinguished, it is a patrician passion. The rage of rappers and rioters takes as its premise the majority’s admission of guilt for past and present injustices, and counts on the admiration of the repressed for the emotional power of the uninhibited and “justly” angry. Rage can also be manipulative; it can be an instrument of censorship and despotism. As a one-time anthropologist, I know a taboo when I see one. Open discussion of many major public questions has for some time now been taboo. We can’t open our mouths without being denounced as racists, misogynists, supremacists, imperialists, or fas-

cists. As for the media, they stand ready to trash anyone so designated.

What we too readily dismiss as mere myth or fantasy—placing our immortal souls at risk of eternal damnation should we still believe in such ethereal things—the reality of evil and the its ever-present master, the serpent, Satan. “Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1).

Satan has all the time he needs, he has no need to rush. We human creatures, on the other hand, are “time-sensitive” and as Jerry Reed once crooned, “We’ve got a long way to go and a short time to get there.” We have become too busy, too enthralled with the rush to go nowhere, believing that anywhere but here and now will do. We have become addicted to progress, constant change for the mere sake of change and the perpetual “new” and “improved.” We no longer have reason to look to the past, no longer have the need to learn of our ancestors’ mistakes or relish in the glory of their accomplishments. We no longer fear God for we are as gods and gods do not fear their selves.

We have become far too complacent, unwilling to stand firm against the angry voices of ignorance and unbelief, too willing to accept the hopelessness and ennui which invades within and the moral entropy that bombards us from without. All this is by design, not by God, who loves us, but from the evil at the Devil’s hands.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

The most recent issue of *Touchstone* leads with an editorial, *Deliver Us from Evil*. Written by Anthony Esolen, it offers some welcome insights into the moral decline of the nation into primeval savagery, anarchy and chaos.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his famous letter from Birmingham Jail to his fellow Christian pastors, he appealed to their faith, their reason, and the angels of their better nature. He desired that the United States finally live up to the promise of her belief in the equality of all persons before the law, and their equality in dignity as conferred upon them by their Creator. He was appealing to a good nation that had permitted great evil.

At this point in the moral decline of our nation, are we any longer in King's position? Can we appeal to a good nation marred by evil deeds? While the nation includes many citizens seeking justice and doing good, in its legislation and court rulings, we discern what can only be called great evil deliberately committed by the state. Our nation's evil still may be masked at times by good deeds and by the residue of what the nation once was and is no longer.

This is a dreadful judgment to make. It is compelling, however, if we acknowledge, alas, that Reverend King today could not appeal to faith, reason, or even our better nature. Faith subsists now under sufferance; reason is traduced as a tool fashioned by those in power to keep them so; nature is denied or despised or violated at every pass; and as for "better," the judgment it implies falls under the egalitarian ban.

In the matters of abortion, protecting the innocence of children, the very definition of marriage, and

those laws and customs that promote and protect the natural family, Christians have on their side not only the word of God, but ordinary biology, anthropology readily observable by people of ordinary intelligence and no advanced education, logic, moral axioms common to every human civilization, and the thought of men of letters of the West for more than two thousand years.

This rich deposit of truth and wisdom all seems to count for nothing. You cannot use reason to defeat people who deny what reason is. You cannot remind people of the wisdom of the past when they neither know the past nor care to know. You cannot cite authority when your opponent's principle is that of the serpent: "You shall be as gods." You cannot appeal to nature to reach the soul of someone committed to perversion. You cannot show the beauty of male and female to people of *ressentiment* who desire that the family should sicken and die.

You cannot praise, with tears, the beauty of a vulnerable human child to people who place gain above goodness and so make their children pass through the fire to Moloch. It does not work. Church bells toll believers to prayer, but devils to the gnashing of teeth—and stratagems and spoils. Devils are loose in the land. I am not speaking about bad people, whereof we will always have plenty. My sins are enough to trouble me till my death. I am speaking about the real item, devils, and their malign possession of a nation's soul.

Should we in the United States be so characterized? What affection we may have for democracy is severely tested by an *ideology* of radical egalitarian individualism. This ideology sacrifices duty to will, excellence to mediocrity, and a complex order to a simplistic egalitarianism that masks a staggering inequality be-

tween the state and every other association of a once free people.

That ideology has made the word *hierarchy* a slur, even while the people submit supinely to the most arrogant and meddlesome laws reaching every feature of what once was the liberty of ordinary people in the ordinary duties of life.

It has made *patriarchy* a slur, even while millions of children grow up without fathers in the home, too many churches are staffed by feminists and sodomites, and innumerable boys grow up without the slightest direction or encouragement or even sympathy on their wayward journey to manhood, if they should manage to embark upon the journey at all.

It promises that we shall all be the gods of our personal and fantastical universes, meaning that we shall all be as ants in an anthill, grains of sand in a desert, atoms in a chaos.

This ideology, or idolatry, of individualistic, egalitarian "democracy" has given us now the worst of all worlds: puritanism without purity; censoriousness built upon evil standards, or delusional standards, or no standards at all; a First Commandment against making judgments that imply inequalities; and the coarsening and slow demise of high culture, with no vital folk culture to bring a new high culture to birth.

It has given us infanticide: butchering a baby alive and kicking. It has rejoiced in murdering the innocence of children. Even some churches chant happily along, Arch-High Songsters of the First Church of Ba'al.

How are we to feel about it? I am reminded of a scene from C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, in which the hero Ransom comes to understand what it is like to hate with a perfect hate, a clean white fire, that does not seek



vengeance against persons for personal reasons, but against evil because it is evil. It is to share in the divine hatred for evil; what the psalmists sing of, what they often pray that God will make manifest.

Other than bare existence, justice is the only good left for God to grant to the self-determinedly wicked. The fire of charity is agony to them. Evidence is not far to seek. When you meet someone who celebrates the death of a baby, or who scowls and sulks to see a pure young man and woman in love, you see someone treading close to the brink of a cliff—the same over which plunged the swine, filled and maddened by a legion of devils.

My God, let it not be so for the country we still love, not yet. But if it *must* come, let it come swiftly. Let us pray for mercy for all persons. For nations—up to a point. But let God's justice storm as he wills.<sup>4</sup>

Maintaining the moral high ground has become increasingly difficult and precarious, as shaky as if one were straddling the San Andreas fault. That religion and politics were, until recently, inseparably joined at the hip is an indisputable fact, a fact which sorely needs resurrection and frequent reminding. Politicians, long absent from the Church corpus, the Body of Christ, along with more than too many clerics, have been found dancing, unapologetic at being found attending Satan's hedonistic masquerade ball. The moral decay and corruption that has come to permeate all corners of our political and religious institutions reeks with the stench and rot of Gehenna and while they dance the Devil plays the fiddle and laughs aloud.

R. R. Reno, editor for *First Things*,

a publication of the Institute on Religion and Public Life, in the May 2019 issue published an essay, *Faith Amid Corruption*, which is well worth a few moments of reflection. While I am in broad agreement with much of what Reno has to say and believe it to be an accurate assessment of the current institutional politic, the degree to which I agree or disagree I will keep to myself. With that said, what follows are his thoughts in his words, I leave it up to you, dear reader, to reap what benefit you may see fit to harvest.

The Catholic Church in the West is full of corruption—financial, sexual, and spiritual. We are forced to face this hard reality, not the least because the weak pontificate of Pope Francis offers so little of substance. The corruption that afflicts us does not arise from overpowering lusts. Our age is one of nihilism, which empties the soul. The specter of nothingness paralyzes us. In an earlier age, the Church's swaggering spiritual pride bred vainglorious prelates who preached down at the faithful from what they imagined were supreme spiritual heights. In our age, we suffer weak, managerial clergy who address us in therapeutic tones. Their greatest ambition, it seems, is to broker a concordat with the sexual revolution so that Catholics need never feel the least tension with the world's ethos.

When I talk this way, listeners wonder about my continuing commitment to the Church. I am a late entrant into communion with the Church of Rome, having been received in 2004 after more than forty years in the Anglican Church, the communion of my baptism. Have I lost my enthusiasm for Rome? Do I regret swimming the Tiber?

I find these questions understandable, but still odd, since they never

arise in my own mind. Perhaps this is because of my personal history. From 1990 until 2010, I taught theology at a Jesuit University in Omaha, -Nebraska. I knew many priests and was privy to insider gossip. As I've written in the past, before entering the Church I knew that some Jesuits held that sodomy does not violate the vow of celibacy, given the intrinsic sterility of the act. I had Catholic colleagues on the theology faculty who urged fundamental changes in Church doctrine. The university was as mismanaged as any diocese. In short, I was well aware of the Church's corruption before I entered.

But there's a deeper reason why I don't entertain second thoughts or regrets. I've never had enthusiasm for Catholicism in the first place, at least not in the sense of thinking the Church of Rome is "the best." I love classical and Gothic architecture, but I've never invested the grandeur of historic buildings with much theological significance. The Catholic Church's liturgy can be banal. (It was only after entering the Church that I encountered her capacity for elevated worship and fine music.) The Catholic faithful are often lukewarm and minimally catechized. My friend's PCA church in Lincoln, Nebraska, boasted a dozen or more members with more theological knowledge than most Catholic priests. I had no expectations when I entered the Church in 2004, which made it impossible for me to be disappointed or disillusioned on my own behalf.

As a young man, I studied theology, not in preparation for a clerical vocation, but in order to understand what it meant to be a Christian intellectual in the modern West. The Anglicanism to which I was loyal was embroiled in its own struggles with the sexual revolution and other aspects of postwar culture. Over time, a debilitating fear

came to dominate my spiritual life. I watched anxiously as the theological, liturgical, and institutional foundations of my Christian life eroded, leaving me with no solid place to stand. I became aware that I was relying on an increasingly notional and disembodied faith, rather than on the living body of the faithful, the communion of saints. This realization intensified my dread, for the self, even the spiritually mature self, is not a reliable basis for Christian discipleship. I knew I could not persevere. I did not “choose” Catholicism, but collapsed into the Church the way a wounded soldier stumbles into the nearest medic station, not wondering whether it has the best staff or equipment, but wanting only to live.

Protestant movements are far-flung colonies of Catholicism. These ecclesial communities are reforms, refinements, and intensifications of one or another aspect of the Church, which remains their home country. As John Henry Newman observed while still an Anglican, “the Church of Rome preoccupies the ground.” Catholicism is the prime substance of Christianity in the West, its font and source. I recently wrote of my visit last December to the excavations beneath St. Peter’s Basilica (“A Failing Papacy,” February). Gazing on what are thought to be the bones of St. Peter, I received powerful consolations concerning the anchoring continuity of the Church. The Church is often—perhaps always—convulsed by conflict, defiled by corruption, and misruled by mediocrities or worse. But she *is*, and her being is always life-giving.

When I collapsed into the Church in 2004, I was revived. I had no expectations, and yet I received many spiritual gifts, and still do. One of the most important has been the gift of interior prayer. The Real Pres-

ence of Christ in the Sacrifice of the Mass awakens our souls and calls us out of ourselves. A particularly humbling experience in my first years as a Catholic accompanied the realization that, though I had studied theology and embraced the truth of Christ crucified and risen, I had never truly prayed. At the Mass, I found it is almost impossible not to pray. Before the sacrament, it is natural to speak to Christ as to a living person who is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Catholics in the West should be anguished in 2019. There is a great deal of waste in the Church, as we all know. Worldly powers tighten their grip on our moral and spiritual imaginations. *Mater Ecclesia* is wobbling, as are all Western institutions. The tide of Christian influence on our societies is receding. After Vatican II, a not-yet-old Joseph Ratzinger observed that our time is one of sifting and winnowing. Much of the institutional Church is being pared away. We live with the agony of what is being mismanaged, betrayed, and lost.

But we should also be encouraged and joyful. Sex scandals defile the sanctuary and make the clerical collar a sign of shame, but in so doing they force us to direct our attention to the Risen Lord, the One whom men are ordained to serve. It is my conviction that the whole Church is being driven down to her primitive foundations—Sacred Scripture, her continuous liturgy, and the shining witness of the saints—all of which undergird her like Peter’s bones beneath the altar of the basilica.

We are being tried and tested, which means there is great opportunity for spiritual growth and clarity of witness. It is fitting to speak of a crisis in the Church. It’s been going on for decades and is coming into the open now with special force. My intuition is that our agonies stem from a self-inflicted perse-

cution. After Auschwitz, we have internalized, or so it seems to me, the devil’s lie that death is the supreme and final truth. Believing this lie makes us apathetic, incapable of decisive action. Thus the feckless, see-no-evil leadership that all too accurately reflects back to us our own weakened and dread-ridden spiritual lives. But therein rests the promise of this moment in the life of the Church, the promise that always accompanies persecution, even the persecution we impose on ourselves. We are forced out of our ambivalent mediocrity and into decision. As I see more clearly our failures and betrayals, I find myself believing more firmly in the Church’s indefectible stewardship of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word of Life.

Reno, in the June/July 2019 issue of *First Things*, included his thoughts on the current political climate in his essay, *Cultural Nihilism*.

The decline in life expectancy in the United States is a symptom of a failing culture. It is driven by deaths of despair: Suicide rates are up, as are drug overdoses and alcohol-related diseases. Those are hard, cruel facts. There are other signs of failure, more auspicious ones. We read about young voters who reject the status quo. On the left, they are embracing socialism. On the right, they are becoming more conservative on social issues. Surveys show support for LGBT causes rising or remaining steady in all cohorts—except for young self-identified Republicans, among whom it has declined. Left-leaning young adults think their Baby Boomer leaders have betrayed the core value of the left, which is economic solidarity. Right-leaning young adults think the same leadership class has betrayed the core value of the right, which is moral order. On both sides, there’s a

rebellious temperament abroad, one that is increasingly bitter about what it sees as the failures of the '68ers and the culture they mid-wifed.

The young are right to rebel. Our body politic is badly diseased. Economic solidarity has broken down—but it can be repaired. Our shredded moral order poses a more intractable problem. In “The Three Necessary Societies” (June/July 2017), Russell Hittinger suggests the proper framework for thinking about what afflicts us. We are living amid the decline of the marital covenant, the dissolution of political community, and an aversion to religious life. Without these three necessary societies, an individual's life becomes a lonely struggle for financial security and social status.

W. Bradford Wilcox and Lyman Stone present doleful data about sexual relations and religion among younger Americans in a recent article for *The Atlantic*, “The Happiness Recession.” The General Social Survey, the baseline government-sponsored social scientific study, shows that only 25 percent of those between eighteen and thirty-four said in 2018 that they were “very happy,” the lowest level recorded. Stable sexual relationships between men and women are strongly correlated with happiness, and stability in intimate affairs is what eludes those formed by today's toxic culture. Rates of marriage have fallen in that same group, from 59 percent in 1972 to 28 percent in 2018. Cohabitation is down as well, and at similar rates. Even casual sex and short-term relationships have declined. Of those eighteen to thirty-four, 14 percent of women and 22 percent of men report not having had sex in the previous year, both record highs.

Put simply: The male-female dance has become dysfunctional. Sexual liberation and feminism work for

some, but not most. The last fifty years have been good for the highly educated and wealthy. Charles Murray's research shows that the upper end of society has adjusted reasonably well to post-1960s changes in social norms. But it's been hell for normal people—the median.

The same trend toward atomization and isolation holds for religious participation. Among the younger cohort, regular church attendance is down, from 38 percent in 1972 to 27 percent in 2018. The numbers saying they never attend—the Nones—have spiked. The Nones are not secular, if by that term we mean coldly materialistic. But today's ersatz spiritualisms and the patchwork religions of yoga, natural foods, and progressive politics lack the poetic-intellectual coherence and depth of traditional religions. They don't provide communal structures reinforced by rituals and moral disciplines. Just as healthy patterns for intimate life have been demolished by the post-1960s imperatives of liberation, so too have the templates and contexts for spiritual life.

Wilcox and Stone do not provide data on patriotism or civic involvement. But here, too, I predict declines among young Americans. Given the way they are now indoctrinated, I'm sure that fewer in that cohort would say that America is a great nation that has been a force for good in the world. Healthy forms of civic identity have been dismantled. White descendants of Confederate soldiers are told they come from an irredeemably evil background; black descendants of slaves are told their country is irredeemably racist. Males are told they have inherited unjust privileges; women are taught that the past is patriarchal. The rising generation has been stripped of the proper pride one should feel for one's heritage and nation. By default they

are defined by the cold, individualistic machine of market competition and the mad scramble for status on social media.

Our unhappiness has been a long time in the making. It has its sources in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For example, the initial effect of gay liberation was sexual excitement. It titillated the imaginations of the majority of straight people, and the permission granted to sodomy served as plenary permission for all manner of sexual experimentation. The LGBT agenda came to be championed at universities, among corporations, and in the media, and its cultural effects shifted significantly. As sexual perversion came to be affirmed as normal by authoritative institutions, normal sex took on the characteristics of perversion, which is why young people now approach it cautiously. Widespread use of hormonal contraceptives has had a similar effect. In the first stages of its use, the Pill opened up what felt like new erotic horizons. Decades later, sex has shrunk to the exchange of opportunities for pleasure. It's not just #MeToo; consensual sex has a bitter taste. This is one reason why young people are less sexually active than in previous generations.

The poisoning of patriotism and national solidarity comes about in different ways, as does the silencing of religious voices in education and public life. Yes, the virtuosi of critique flourish, landing jobs as literature professors and diversity officers. But here, too, the dominant cultural institutions systematically deprive ordinary Americans of the social sources of happiness. John Rawls was a Harvard professor, not a marginal activist. It was the United States Supreme Court that adopted dire strictures against religion in public life. Howard Zinn's hypercritical approach to American



history was championed by the educational establishment throughout the nation. The same is true for contraception and sexual liberation: They were elite projects from the very beginning.

The unhappiness reported by Wilcox and Stone will not remain a private suffering. It will become a powerful political grievance. Our liberal establishment will frame the grievance as a protest against residual barriers to still greater sexual liberation, female empowerment, and social inclusion, all of which will be blamed on the oppressive structures of tradition that supposedly rule society with an iron fist. But in 2019 it is obvious that our cultural norms are not set by Mormon elders, evangelical pastors, or contemplative nuns. They are set by elite institutions dominated by the Davoisie, which uniformly trumpets its “progressive” values. People are not stupid, at least not over the long haul. At some point, perhaps soon, they will wake up to the fact that their unhappy lives are part of a failed post-1960s culture that’s overseen by establishment authorities insulated from and indifferent to the damage they do.

### Freedom’s Sacred Roots

In *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*, Robert Louis Wilken recounts the standard story of religious freedom. It begins with the Reformation and the division of Europe into rival Christian factions. The factions persecuted one another, setting off the so-called wars of religion. The West seemed trapped in a bloody conflict among dogmas. “But by the middle of the seventeenth century men with greater wisdom and less religious fervor came on the scene, and the fanaticism of religious believers gave way to the cool reason of the philosophers.” The Enlightenment refounded the West on principles of

natural right, reason, and tolerance—our modern way of life.

The story is largely false. Certainly the Reformation triggered religious conflicts, and the political recognition of religious freedom arose in the aftermath of those conflicts. But the influential early modern conceptions of religious liberty drew upon earlier theological sources.

As Wilken observes, pagan Rome understood the importance of religion in public life. “The ordinary and extraordinary events of communal life were set within a sacred and cosmic frame,” and “no form of social life was wholly secular.” This fusion of sacred and secular reflected a sound intuition: The divine rules over history; therefore, good governance seeks to bring the affairs of men into accord with the gods.

The rise of Christianity disrupted this ancient integralism. Christians would not offer worship to other gods, who are but dead idols. Christian dissent evoked from Roman authorities sometimes indulgence, sometimes dismay, and sometimes outright persecution. The latter motivated early Christian figures such as Tertullian to explain why persecution is wrongheaded. Tertullian’s main argument concerned the integrity of worship. “See that you do not end up fostering irreligion,” he warned, “by taking away freedom of religion [*libertas religionis*] and forbid free choice with respect to divine matters, so that I am not allowed to worship what I wish, but am forced to worship what I do not wish. Not even a human being would like to be honored unwillingly.”

Tertullian did not have our contemporary notion of a political right to religious liberty in mind. He was outlining a fundamentally theological idea, which would persist in the Christian West. True worship, he assumes, must accord with the de-

sire of the God of Israel, who demands of his people the whole of their hearts, minds, and souls. The emphasis on inwardness was not unknown in antiquity. Socrates was a martyr to conscience, and Stoicism emphasized integrity of intention as the key to happiness. But these traditions prized an achieved inwardness, won by private mental discipline and available to only a few. Tertullian, by contrast, made a claim about every human being. Worship of the divine was a regular public activity in antiquity, and he argues that the very possibility of genuine piety (prized by all parties in the ancient world) depends upon *libertas religionis*, the freedom to worship in accord with one’s deepest convictions.

Although the individualistic, man-before-God side of religious freedom remained a vital part of the Christian tradition, the ideal of corporate freedom predominated in the early Church. “The phrase ‘freedom of religion’ enters the vocabulary of the West with reference to the privileges of a community, not to the beliefs of individuals.” - Tertullian wished to defend the right of Christians to live and worship as Christians, which of course meant worshipping together in accord with the faith and discipline taught by the Church. This right was secured when Constantine introduced a new religious policy for the empire in 313, issuing the so-called Edict of Milan, which granted Christians full corporate liberty.

As Wilken tells the theological story of religious liberty, the intrinsic tensions become evident. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel thrive only insofar as they are governed in accordance with God’s law. The New Testament loosens the knot binding prophet and king, divine law and civil law, but it does not untie it. Jesus distinguishes between that which we owe to Caesar



and that which we owe to God. But St. Paul insists that the power of the magistrate comes from God and that secular authorities rule as his appointed agents. It was natural, therefore, that the Christianization of the Roman Empire would lead to sustained reflection about how to govern society faithfully in accord with God's will.

In the Middle Ages, the main emphasis fell on defending the liberty of the Church's bishops, whom secular kings wished to turn into proper vassals. But Christian thinkers continued to be concerned about individual freedom of conscience as well, an issue that arose with special urgency whenever coercive measures were taken to force Jews to renounce their faith and accept Christ.

The threat of compulsory religious adherence entered the forefront of theological debate during the Reformation. For many Christians, which dogmas to believe and how to order common worship became questions of profound existential urgency. Moreover, God's authority is an empty concept if it is not manifested in historical, social forms that guide and govern individuals. Faced with dissent, church authorities struggled to discern the limits of their power over individual believers. After all, there can be no community without common belief—which is to say, without orthodoxy—and no common worship without agreement as to proper forms and rituals. The same held for civil rulers, who assumed that civil government was charged with protecting belief and encouraging proper worship.

*Liberty in the Things of God* provides a valuable overview of this long, post-Reformation struggle to find the proper balance between freedom of conscience and the necessary institutional expressions of God's authority. John Calvin de-

fended "spiritual freedom," not just from the coercive power of civil government, but from ecclesiastical legislation as well. The church, he writes, cannot "bind souls inwardly before God and . . . lay scruples on them, as if enjoining things necessary to salvation." But Calvin's position turned out to be unstable. It was either platitudinous—by definition, no outward power, ecclesiastical or civil, can bind souls inwardly—or unworkable, for no community, sacred or secular, can function if every individual has the right to opt out, as Calvin knew and acknowledged elsewhere in his theological writings.

Indeed, Wilken describes two Protestants formed by Calvinist theology, John Cotton and Roger Williams, clashing on these grounds. Cotton was a Puritan leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, responsible for the spiritual welfare of his community. Williams was a dissenter keen to defend the integrity of conscience and the purity of Christian faith. Cotton had access to civil powers, which allowed him to secure the banishment of the troublesome Williams. The latter, however, was in many ways the winner, for it was Williams's rigorous view of religious freedom that largely prevailed in America.

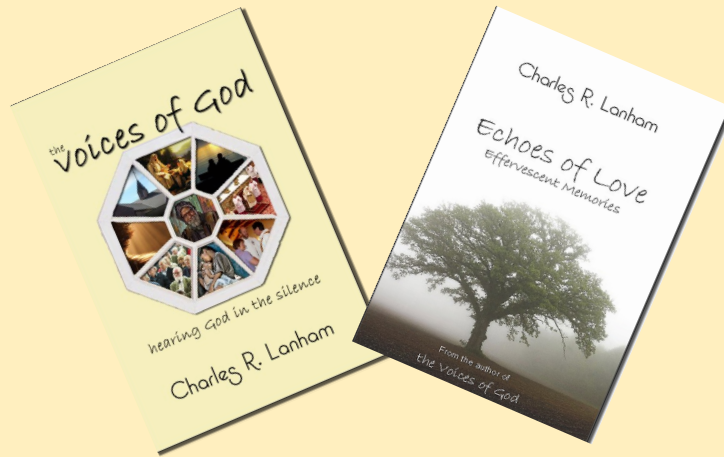
I'm grateful for our tradition of religious freedom in the United States, and Wilken's account of its theological sources clarified for me why my gratitude is not unequivocal. The strongest formulations of religious freedom were developed by dissenters such as Roger Williams and John Owen. Their outcries on behalf of the sanctity of conscience are admirable, but they fail to recognize the heavy burden of governance, which always entails moral and even theological judgments. (To assert that governance involves nothing of theological import is itself a theological judgment.) Thomas Jefferson famously

said, "It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." The sentiment of tolerance is to be applauded, but Jefferson is obviously wrong when it comes to the facts. What my neighbor says about God may not affect me, but it surely affects my children. And if that neighbor is my children's high school teacher, it may affect them a great deal. Only an Enlightenment figure like Jefferson, who regarded theological matters as superfluous, could imagine that the widespread expression of rebarbative religious beliefs would be of no public consequence. Indeed, precisely an intuition about the substantial consequences of belief is what lies behind the strict separation doctrine that dominates our legal regime today. Judges worry that prayer at events such as high school graduations will sway and seduce vulnerable young people. In this sense, they follow in the tradition of John Cotton, though they aim at an opposite outcome.

I strongly favor loosening the knot that binds secular authority and divine truth: Our magistrates should not imagine themselves prophets, whether of God or of history. But we must not pretend we can untie that knot altogether. As *Liberty in the Things of God* shows, our culture of freedom itself has profound theological roots. To sustain it we must govern with care and wisdom, nourishing those roots while respecting liberty of conscience as best we can.

Until next week, let freedom ring.

1. Michael Walsh, *The Devil's Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2017) pp.6-7.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 15-16.
3. S. M. Hutchens, "Quodlibet: The Joys of the One-Can-Short," *Touchstone*, January/February 2019, p. 5.
4. Anthony Esolen, "Deliver Us from Evil: Justice Demands an Assessment of Injustice," Editorial, *Touchstone*, May/June 2019, pp. 3-4.



Books are available  
on **Amazon.com** or from  
the author's web site at:

**deacons corner.org**

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

He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and is currently writing his third book **Without God: Finding God in a Godless World**.

Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from

**<http://deacons corner.org>**.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

**[deacon.chuck@deacons corner.org](mailto:deacon.chuck@deacons corner.org)**

**Colloquī** is a weekly publication of **Deacon's Corner Publishing**.

Copyright © 2016 by **Deacon's Corner Publishing**. All rights reserved.

## **Deacon's Corner Publishing**

4742 Cougar Creek Trail

Reno, Nevada 89519