

MATTHEW R. PETRUSEK

FOREWORD BY CARDINAL THOMAS COLLINS

# EVANGELIZATION AND IDEOLOGY

HOW TO UNDERSTAND  
AND RESPOND TO THE  
POLITICAL CULTURE

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# Foreword

*Cardinal Thomas Collins*

Many years ago, when I was a young priest, my bishop sent me to study Scripture. The biblical book that I studied most intensely was the Apocalypse, the book of Revelation, written in the last decade of the first century to strengthen the Christians of what is now Turkey. Some of them were thrown to the beasts in the arena because of their insistence that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. From the days of the Apocalypse to this present day, the disciples of Jesus have been willing to offer the ultimate witness of martyrdom. Each year many thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ give up their homes, their freedom, and often their lives rather than deny Jesus, our Lord and God.

But many disciples of Jesus in the time of the Apocalypse were more like Christians in modern Western society: they would not be called upon to die for Christ, but they were called upon to live for Christ with integrity in an alien society. They were called to live as faithful citizens of the heavenly city Jerusalem, the city of God, while passing through godless Babylon, the city of man, which was under the spell of ideologies contrary to the Gospel. Yearning for the rock of Gospel reality, they were caught in the swamp of secular illusion.

That has been the challenge for Christians down through the ages. It is our challenge now. How do we effectively proclaim the life-giving reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a society in which people are deluded by ideologies that, upon examination, are revealed to be both false and destructive? Yet these ideologies, though misguided, shape the thoughts and behaviors of citizens and the policies of governments. Popular culture is distorted by

them, and increasingly, those who do not go along with them find themselves silenced and pressured to conform.

To survive in such a desert, and to bring the life of the Gospel of Jesus to our fellow human beings in the midst of it, we need to draw water joyfully from the wells of salvation (Isa. 12:3). We do that through prayer, the reception of the sacraments, and the practice of sacrificial love. But we also need to understand the workings of the negative ideologies with which we are confronted in our mission of evangelization.

*Evangelization and Ideology: How to Understand and Respond to the Political Culture* offers us invaluable assistance as we seek to fulfill the mandate entrusted to each of us in Baptism and Confirmation: to witness to the reality of the Gospel in our sadly deluded world, which too often is like a house of mirrors in which illusion seems to have triumphed over reality. The spiritually and intellectually fruitful insights of this book allow us to understand the society in which, by the providence of God, we are called and sent to witness to Christ, and they help us to communicate effectively the reality of the Good News in an environment distorted by deadly illusion.

# Introduction: The Politicization of the Culture: A Challenge and an Opportunity

“Politics and religion are best not discussed in polite company.”

Whatever wisdom this adage may have once contained, only half of it is heeded anymore. Religion certainly remains verboten in public, yet politics is now all the rage. Indeed, it’s difficult to find a social domain that has *not* been politicized: art, music, cinema, education, public health, literature, science—even coffee, cookies, canned beans, pillows, and toys<sup>1</sup>—are now battlefields

1. For example, there have been massive calls to boycott the CEO of the Hispanic food company Goya because he said positive words about former president Donald Trump (see David Goldman, “Goya Foods boycott takes off after its CEO praises Trump,” CNN, July 10, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/10/business/goya-foods-boycott-trump/index.html>). A young political activist gained national attention when he promised to found a new “progressive” pillow company to combat the success of the company “My Pillow,” whose CEO was also supportive of President Trump (see Meryl Kornfield, “Parkland survivor David Hogg launches his own company in a ‘pillow fight’ against Mike Lindell,” *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/02/09/david-hogg-good-pillow-mike-lindell/>); the activist ultimately abandoned the idea. The state of California recently banned retail stores from “gendering” their toy aisles with blue and pink colors (see Adam Beam, “California becomes first state to require gender-neutral toy aisles at large retail stores,” *USA Today*, October 10, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/10/10/california-mandate-gender-neutral-toy-sections/6082593001/>). Oreo cookies are no longer always black and white; you can now purchase rainbow-themed cookies to “celebrate” LGBTQ+ “pride” (see Marika Gerken, “Oreo created limited edition rainbow cookies

of ideological warfare. The markers of political tribalism have become more pronounced in the process: Do you drive an F-150 or a Prius? Shop at Walmart or Whole Foods? Watch Fox News or MSNBC? Listen to AM talk radio or FM NPR? Own a gun (or two or three) or a yoga mat (or two or three)? Do you sip an insulated mug that proudly displays “Leftist Tears”? Or does yours declare “No Justice, No Peace”? Do ads for tactical flashlights and emergency food supplies pop up when you watch YouTube? Or are you interrupted by invitations to organic meal plans and portable juice blenders? Did you want to be seen without a mask during the 2020–2022 pandemic? Or did you wear yours with pride?

There is plentiful comedy in our hyper-politicized culture, an environment in which news can be difficult to distinguish from satire.<sup>2</sup> Yet fear and suffering lie just beneath the surface. Those who have lost their businesses to riots or their jobs to decade-old tweets don’t find the politicization of the culture funny. Those who no longer feel comfortable exposing their children to public school curriculum but cannot afford private alternatives aren’t in on the joke either. Nor are those who work full time, spend responsibly, but cannot make rent. Nor those who fear the government will force them to violate their conscience or be fired. Nor those who are branded “bigots” for wanting their daughters

to celebrate LGBTQ+ History Month,” CNN, October 9, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/09/us/oreo-rainbow-cookies-lgbtq-month-trnd/index.html>). The coffee chain Starbucks has been accused of participating in a “war on Christmas” by refusing to include (secular) Christmas imagery on its “holiday-themed” cups (see Marisa Iati, “Starbucks holiday cups were once a flash point in a ‘war on Christmas.’ Now they’re a meme,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/11/04/starbucks-coffee-holiday-cup-meme/>). The list goes on.

2. The Babylon Bee is a comedy site that satirizes politics and the culture from a mostly politically conservative point of view. Despite the fact that the site openly identifies itself as producing satire, some “hard news” organizations have engaged in “fact checking” its claims. See, for example, “Fact Check–Satirical article by the Babylon Bee about Nancy Pelosi taken seriously,” Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-pelosi-satire-sacrifice/fact-check-satirical-article-by-the-babylon-bee-about-nancy-pelosi-taken-seriously-idUSL1N2MK1U2>.

to compete against other biological females in school sports. Nor those who have no affordable access to medical care and are one illness away from bankruptcy. Nor those who fear errant bullets will pass through their windows and kill them while they sleep. Nor those who have lost a loved one to a drug overdose. Indeed, the more we obsess about politics, the more broken our common life seems to become.

But what does all this civic turmoil have to do with evangelization, especially since “religious” speech in public (still respecting the opening adage) continues to be shunned? Moreover, Americans and Europeans are leaving organized religion in droves nowadays, including the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Many people, perhaps most people, just don’t seem to care about God anymore. And many of those who do care, care in the same way a landlord cares about a squatter: they want religion kicked out from the public square once and for all. From this perspective, evangelization and the political culture would appear to be at odds. Whatever hope remains for the Church to evangelize society in the twenty-first century, it would thus seem that the best path forward would be to steer clear of the sociopolitical arena altogether.

Although it may sound counterintuitive, this book makes the opposite case: the hyper-politicization of society constitutes an opportunity for evangelization rather than an obstacle. In ways that may not have been possible in previous decades, when secularization trends were palpable but not yet dominant, the Church has a unique opening to re-enter the sociopolitical fray, re-engage the secular mind, and call the culture back to Christ—provided we can effectively understand and respond to the contemporary ideological battlefield.

3. See, for example, this recent polling by Gallup: Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

There is a two-pronged reason for approaching evangelization this way. First, things are falling apart. Establishing an empirically sound causal relationship between the secularization and politicization of the culture and the decline of social and individual well-being is complex, but there are ample data points to raise concern. Even before the 2020–2022 pandemic, rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, drug overdoses, school dropouts, divorce, self-reported loneliness, and social isolation were already soaring. Moreover, as more children in the womb are killed—nearly 25 percent of all pregnancies in the US currently end in an abortion<sup>4</sup>—those who survive through birth are growing up to find themselves without siblings or substantive friendships. And even if we callously insist that these trends don't matter as long as society continues to progress economically and technologically, the stubborn fact remains that secular societies tend not to have enough children to perpetuate themselves in the long run, a phenomenon known as demographic death.<sup>5</sup> There is no guarantee that these destructive currents will spur a religious reawakening, but, like all suffering, they at least crack open the possibility for reconsidering the sacred. Evangelists thus must be ready to speak to the swelling number of the disenchanting with the possibility of another way of life.

The second reason is that, despite the common insistence that all religion, including Catholicism, is “irrational,” the Church's social doctrines provide a more reasonable sociopolitical framework than secular alternatives. One of the greatest prejudices of our age is “presentism,” or the blind assertion that the present is morally superior to the past simply because it is

4. Rachel K. Jones and Jenna Jerman, “Population Group Abortion Rates and Lifetime Incidence of Abortion: United States, 2008–2014,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107 (2017): 1904–1909, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304042>.

5. See, for example, Damien Cave, Emma Bubola, and Choe Sang-Hun, “Long Slide Looms for World Population, With Sweeping Ramifications,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/22/world/global-population-shrinking.html>.

more recent. Embedded within presentism is the belief that a society holds the views it does because it has passed through a moral and intellectual evolution. That is true on some issues, to be sure—ending the practice of slavery, striking racially discriminatory laws, and extending voting rights to women, for example. Yet it is not necessarily true on all questions. For instance, it used to be considered self-evident that every child deserves to be born to and raised by a loving mother and father. Yet today large numbers of people tag that once obvious conviction as “hateful” and even evidence of a “phobia” (even though *they* all have mothers and fathers). Is this a sign of moral evolution? Has the argument in support of the traditional family been rationally defeated? Has it been shown to be false? Setting aside the frustratingly frequent tendency of being informed, in one breath, that there is no such thing as “moral objectivity” while, in the next, being scolded for holding the wrong point of view, the question of truth, the question of rightness and wrongness, is as alive today as it ever has been. So, again: Are *all* our values really better than our predecessors’, including the new definition of “family”?

Answering that question requires determining what “better” means, which points to the question of what “good” means, which, in turn, points to the question of what is “true.”<sup>6</sup> What should we believe as true, then? What is believable? On what grounds do we believe it? According to what standard of rationality? It may come as a surprise to Catholics—and this is a sad reflection of the Church’s efforts to evangelize itself—but Catholicism has deep, systematic, comprehensive, coherent, and rationally sound responses to these questions, as they relate to both the definition

6. Rejecting a rational connection between “what is true” and “what is good” would mean that we could claim that there are false ideas that are also good ideas. At some level, every moral theory must be grounded in some connection of what it takes to be “objectively true.” Even a utilitarian theory that would say that lies are “good” in some instances also believes that its conception of the good—the greatest good for the greatest number—is *true*. This book will explain the relationship between competing conceptions of goodness and truth in depth.

of the family and everything else in the sociopolitical sphere. In other words, Catholics are well equipped to talk about politics *as Catholics* and to make the case for the comprehensive Catholic view of moral reality. The Church holds a trove of good arguments that, despite having existed for thousands of years, have been mostly absent from contemporary public debates—arguments that are superior to competing political philosophies, not despite being grounded in a doctrine of God, but precisely *because* they are grounded in a doctrine of God.

#### OUT OF BOUNDS?

But wait. Doesn't this approach to evangelization contravene the first commandment of all secular ideologies, that thou shalt not mix God and politics? Wouldn't it be a violation of the separation of church and state? Wouldn't it be an imposition of the Church's beliefs on others? And wouldn't that, in violation of secularism's second commandment, be intolerant? And doesn't being intolerant mean that you are full of hate?

In an age in which political discourse has been reduced to bumper-sticker soundbites whose moral authority depends on how well the words rhyme (e.g., "Keep Your Rosaries off My Ovaries," "Silence is Violence," "Hey Hey, Ho Ho, [enter target of opprobrium] Has Got to Go," or, less felicitously, "Pigs in a Blanket, Fry Them Like Bacon"), answering these questions requires extensive conceptual disentangling and a journey back to the proverbial drawing board. First, all who insist that appeals to religious principles have no place in political debates necessarily position themselves in opposition to the arguments of Martin Luther King Jr. and much of the moral logic of the American civil rights movement more broadly. This is not a cheap shot against secularism. It is a statement of fact: there is no intellectually responsible way to disaggregate some "religion-free" nugget of moral truth from the body of Martin Luther King's case for racial equality.

Take, for example, these passages from one of Martin Luther King's most renowned writings, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail":

The question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment.<sup>7</sup>

Whenever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But [the Christians] went on with the conviction that they were a "colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.<sup>8</sup>

One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are *just* and there are *unjust* laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all." . . . A just law is a manmade code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas

7. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 95.

8. King, 97.

Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in the eternal or the natural law.<sup>9</sup>

And in case there is any doubt that Martin Luther King Jr. employed *religious* language to address a *public* audience, note these excerpts from his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy; now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice; now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood; now is the time to make justice a reality for all God’s children.<sup>10</sup>

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning—“my country ’tis of thee; sweet land of liberty; of thee I sing” . . . and if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.<sup>11</sup>

[W]hen we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God’s children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”<sup>12</sup>

9. King, 89.

10. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in *I Have a Dream*, 103.

11. King, 105.

12. King, 105–106.

There is, in short, no way to shuck the shell of religion from Martin Luther King Jr.'s arguments and end up with some secular nugget intact. Remove God—indeed, remove the Bible—from King's moral vocabulary, and you lose King himself and the movement he represented.

The public appeal to religion is not a relic of history, moreover. Politicians across the ideological spectrum continue to invoke the divine to explain and defend their positions (though we may question whether their appeals are as authentic as King's). "Red State" Republicans are well known for speaking about God publicly. Yet "Blue State" Democrats commonly employ theological language as well. For example, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi—in diametric contradiction to Catholic teaching—once declared that abortion rights are "sacred ground."<sup>13</sup> President Joe Biden, who excoriated his predecessor for "using" religion to advance his agenda,<sup>14</sup> has also identified his belief in God as the core theological framework out of which flow his fundamental governing principles.<sup>15</sup> Even self-declared socialist Bernie Sanders has shared that "religious principles" have deeply shaped his political values.<sup>16</sup> These are a few prominent examples of many. In short, though the United States may be growing less religious, most people still have no problem voting for candidates who employ "God talk" regularly in their stump speeches.

13. See "Pelosi On Abortion: 'As A Practicing And Respectful Catholic, This Is Sacred Ground To Me,'" Real Clear Politics, June 13, 2013, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2013/06/13/pelosi\\_on\\_abortion\\_as\\_a\\_practicing\\_and\\_respectful\\_catholic\\_this\\_is\\_sacred\\_ground\\_to\\_me.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2013/06/13/pelosi_on_abortion_as_a_practicing_and_respectful_catholic_this_is_sacred_ground_to_me.html).

14. See Christina Wilkie and Amanda Macias, "Biden slams Trump's response to George Floyd protests: 'More interested in power than principle,'" CNBC, June 2, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/02/george-floyd-protests-biden-slams-trump-over-st-johns-church-photo-op.html>.

15. See Asma Khalid, "How Joe Biden's Faith Shapes His Politics," NPR, September 20, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/20/913667325/how-joe-bidens-faith-shapes-his-politics>.

16. See Eugene Scott, "Bernie Sanders, America's most prominent 'un-affiliated' politician, still says religion shaped his values," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/07/bernie-sanders-religion-values-how-both-shape-his-politics/>.

Second, the secular insistence that there exists a bright conceptual line between “religious” beliefs and principles and “nonreligious” beliefs and principles is more myth than reality. Take, for example, the claim that “all human beings are equal,” which is something that (at least for the time being) no politician would dare deny openly. It certainly sounds good. Yet what is the justification for this belief? What distinguishes it from sheer superstition, blind appeal to authority, or even fanciful delusion? Why is it reasonable? Whatever the answer, the belief in universal moral equality certainly isn’t justified from a scientific or empirical perspective for at least two reasons: (1) “moral equality” cannot be empirically identified, and (2) there is nothing empirically observable in human beings that is both unique to humanity *and* that exists in absolute equality among all humans without exception.<sup>17</sup> Consider some possible observable characteristics that might be relevant to justifying the existence of human dignity: IQ, self-awareness, the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, the capacity to form relationships, the capacity to communicate, the capacity to create art, the capacity for self-directed action, etc. Which of these, or any other attribute, are *both* universally present in all human beings without exception *and* universally present in all human beings to the same degree? The answer is none. And even if, in a philosophical move related to the thought of Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, we seek to ground equal human worth in some abstract conception of “autonomy” (being a law unto oneself), we are still talking about a human capacity and, therefore, still talking about something that is unequally distributed across the human population and, indeed, across human individuals throughout the course of their own

17. As I’ll argue in more depth below, human DNA is insufficient to establish human dignity because every other species also has its own unique DNA markers, and it would be morally arbitrary to claim that our uniqueness is somehow more “special” than the uniqueness present in other species purely on biochemical grounds.

lifetimes. In short, even a quick examination of the question shows that it is far from clear that a purely secular epistemology, completely devoid of any conception of God, could coherently justify the belief that “all human beings are equal.”

So, then, does believing in human dignity make you a religious fanatic or a superstitiously credulous looney? Does it make you, to use the words of atheist cultural critic Bill Maher, a “[blank]ing nut” (language he used to describe Catholic Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett)?<sup>18</sup> If so, we should all inform our political class (and the Declaration of Independence) immediately, so they’ll cease all this religious claptrap about “human equality.” If not—if the belief in universal moral value is not something we are willing to jettison (yet)—then perhaps we can admit that the lines between “faith” and “reason” may not be as bright as secularism has been insisting. This is not to say that we cannot make meaningful distinctions between what pertains to the domain of “religion” and what pertains to the domain of “rationality.” (It is also *not* to say that universal human equality is irrational.) However, it *is* to recognize—again, contra secularism’s self-soothing mythmaking—that the relationship between “religious beliefs” and “rational beliefs,” especially in moral matters, is immensely complex. We should stop pretending otherwise.

Finally, and most importantly for this book, the Catholic social thought tradition can and does make moral arguments without explicitly appealing to “faith” or what the tradition also calls “revelation.” Indeed, the basic epistemic presupposition of Catholic social ethics is that it is intelligible to all human beings, no matter what explicit religion they may or may not profess. It is for this reason that papal encyclicals and exhortations on social questions are addressed—explicitly since the papacy of Pope St.

18. See Ross A. Lincoln and Phil Owen, “Bill Maher Says Amy Coney Barrett Is ‘a F-ing Nut,’” *The Wrap*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.thewrap.com/bill-maher-says-amy-coney-barrett-is-a-f-ing-nut/>.

John XXIII and implicitly before then—to “all people of good will.” “All people of good will” means all people who are open and willing to seek truth and to do to their best to abide by it, even if there are disagreements along the way. The moral arguments that constitute Catholic social thought do not presuppose that one has accepted Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior, that the Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus Christ, that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven, or that God is one God in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). They only presuppose that you are willing to use the natural light of reason and follow wherever it leads. This is not to say that the dogmatic truths that come to us in revelation—the deposit of faith that God has communicated to the Church in Scripture and Tradition—are against reason or not open to rational engagement. It is to say, however, that believing in the content of revelation is not an epistemic precondition for understanding and rationally evaluating the validity and soundness of Catholic social teaching.

Highlighting Catholic social thought’s appeal to epistemic universality is important not only for identifying how the tradition seeks to make its case but also for nipping the “imposing your values” objection in the bud. It shows the objection to be a red herring. First, it is not clear what “imposing” means. If it means coercing someone to do something that they disagree with (or not allowing them to do something they want to do), then any and every law is an “imposition” on someone’s beliefs. And Catholicism, of course, is not a legislative or executive or judicial body; it cannot make or enforce any civil law. The most it can do is make arguments in the public square about what it takes to be morally right, just like every other individual and group. In this sense, the Church cannot “impose” its vision of the good more than any other group in society.

If, on the other hand, “imposing” means making moral claims that other people disagree with, then all people who make public arguments, whether “religious” or not, are guilty of “imposing”

their beliefs on others. In this case, “being imposed on” simply means “being exposed to.” Consequently, the only way to prevent “imposing one’s beliefs” on others from this perspective would be for everyone to agree to remain silent about all moral and political matters in the civic sphere. That may sound preferable to our current politics; however, in addition to paralyzing democratic decision-making, it’s not a truce, I suspect, that would last very long.

In sum, it’s ultimately not important or even relevant whether an argument is “religious” or “nonreligious” or whether someone might think that it constitutes an “imposition.” The only thing that matters, in the end, is how well the argument holds up under scrutiny. This book will be making the case that the Catholic argument—the *big* argument on the best understanding of the nature and purpose of politics—holds up very well indeed, especially when examined in relation to secular alternatives.

#### WINNING MINDS OR SAVING SOULS? YES.

But even if it is the case that Catholic social teaching provides a better political paradigm, what evangelical purpose does political argument serve? What relationship could it possibly have to the Good News of Jesus Christ or to the call to conversion and repentance? The evangelical strategy is twofold.

First, the book’s proximate goal is to show how political debate, done with the right tools, can help win minds to a conception of the good that is, in fact, *good*, one that establishes a moral and political framework that gives us the best shot at creating a civil environment that engenders individual and communal flourishing, to the extent it’s possible in a fallen world. In other words, the first goal is to equip evangelists—and *every* baptized Catholic is called to be an evangelist—to make the strongest possible case for the natural-law alternative to secular politics.

Yet within and beyond this goal lies an invitation to something deeper—much deeper—than debate about the political

order and advocacy for a particular sociopolitical structure. The final goal is not ultimately about “winning an argument” or even working to establish and maintain an authentically just society, as noble as that is. The greater goal, the goal behind the goal, is to offer the culture an escape from hyper-politicization by presenting an alternative to thinking—and acting—ideologically altogether. It is to invite the culture into a relationship with a man who calls everyone to do everything possible to fix the world while also unambiguously declaring, “My kingdom is not from this world” (John 18:36).

In short, the social teachings of the Catholic Church rationally stand on their own. But that rationality points through itself to its foundation—the Logos—who is, simultaneously, *Agape*, unconditional love. It points to Jesus Christ. Indeed, as the Gospel of John reveals, the ground of truth itself—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1–3)—is one and the same as the man who declares, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In sum, if evangelists can make a convincing case that the Church has a good vision of politics, a vision grounded in objective truth, then we at least open the door for considering whether the Church might have a good vision of religion as well—a vision founded in objective love. This approach to evangelization does not transform politics into religion or religion into politics. Much the opposite: it allows us to present the two in right relationship to each other and put both in service of God and the authentic human good.

#### BUILDING A FRAMEWORK

*Evangelization and Ideology* is divided into two parts comprised of ten chapters, including this introduction (chapter 1). Part I develops a methodology for employing Catholic social thought to debate secular ideologies. Drawing on the writings of Bishop

Robert Barron and the Catholic philosophers Peter Kreeft and Fr. Ronald Tacelli, SJ, chapter 2 of part I, “Stop Fighting—and Start Arguing,” identifies how to engage in political discussions by identifying the fundamental principles of moral argumentation. Chapter 3 of part I, “Getting Your Bearings: Locating the Sources of Political Disagreement,” discusses *where* to engage in political discussion—not geographically but conceptually. As the chapter explains, most sociopolitical disagreements are not fundamentally about different laws or policies; rather, they are about competing theories of justice (morality and applied morality), knowledge (epistemology), human nature (anthropology), and/or the nature of existence (metaphysics or ontology). Finally, chapter 4 of part I, “From How to Debate to What to Say: The Comprehensive Toolbox of Catholic Social Thought,” explains the features of Catholic morality that are most relevant to challenging secular ideologies. These features include moral truth, moral progress and its limits, moral hierarchies and the common good, human dignity, and free speech, all of which are paradigmatically present in the life and thought of Pope St. John Paul II.

Part II of the book turns to analyzing diverse secular ideologies, showing how Catholic social thought provides a better alternative to each. Chapter 5, “Totality without Transcendence: The Anatomy of an Ideology,” identifies the basic constitutive moral logic of all “ideologies” per se, notwithstanding their otherwise profound differences. Having established a basic definition of ideology as idolatry, the following chapters critically consider four secular ideologies by identifying their foundational principles, examining one or more contemporary representatives, and then arguing how Catholic social thought addresses their respective shortcomings. Chapter 6 engages utilitarianism (“The God of Pleasure”), chapter 7 engages classical liberalism and libertarianism (“The God of My Self”), chapter 8 engages progressivism, also known as “wokeism” (“The God of My Tribe”), and chapter 9 engages non-theistic conservatism (“The God of Fortune”).

The final chapter, chapter 10, offers practical advice on how to apply the book's arguments to evangelize all who are willing to listen in the political sphere.

It is important to note that part I can function independently of part II, meaning that readers can “get” the book's primary points by reading part I alone. Part II seeks to complement part I by offering those who are interested a deeper dive into the philosophical foundations of our age's reigning secular ideologies and how the Catholic social thought tradition can constructively respond to each. The book's conclusion, in turn, serves to tie together both parts I and II.

#### MARKING BOUNDARIES AND MOVING FORWARD

A few parameters before diving in. First, this book is not about specific political issues. That doesn't mean that issues are unimportant; indeed, some issues, like abortion and euthanasia, are matters of life and death. However, “issues” are only “issues” insofar as they have their grounding in a comprehensive vision of what is good and bad, right and wrong. Thus, to “win” on the issues in any meaningful and durable sense, we must “win” at the deeper levels of moral reality.

Second, this book is meant to serve as an introduction to Catholic social thought and to the rival political theories it engages. There is great complexity both within Catholic sociopolitical ethics and its competition. This book does not provide a comprehensive explanation or assessment of that complexity. Many very thoughtful people both inside and outside the Church have devised intricate political theories that defy facile categorization. The principles in these pages are meant only to mark out and critically evaluate general territories in the sociopolitical landscape, taking a thirty-thousand-foot view. My hope is that these generalizations provide accurate and useful maps that enable and—in the case of Catholic social thought—*inspire* readers to take a closer look.

Third, the book will examine secular political ideologies primarily from a US perspective. What a “conservative,” “liberal,” “utilitarian,” “progressive,” “green,” etc. looks like can vary depending on the unique political culture of a region, each of which has its unique history and culture. As noted, there are many important nuances to consider when engaging in political debates. Context always matters. That said, many of the characteristics of secular ideologies do indeed transcend national, cultural, and historical boundaries. Those cross-cultural characteristics will be the focus of the analysis.

Fourth, while there are some sociopolitical questions on which faithful Catholics cannot disagree—for example, on when life begins (at conception), when life ends (natural death), and what defines a marriage (a lifelong union between a biological woman and a biological man that is open to procreation)—there are some questions on which disagreement is not only morally legitimate but also desirable because it leads to better laws and public policies. Questions related to economic, environmental, defense, and security policies often fall into this category. In explicating and defending the principles of Catholic social thought this book thus does not take a stand on any prudential sociopolitical judgment—that is to say, judgments related to questions on which people of good will and sound reasoning can legitimately differ. Relatedly, it does not endorse any political party, though some party platforms are clearly more consonant with Catholic teaching than others (and some party platforms entirely contradict Catholic teaching). Moreover, as the chapter on Catholic social thought will highlight specifically, a productive tension exists within the heart of the Catholic view of politics, found, paradigmatically, in the tension between the political thought of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. This tension is not a problem to be fixed but rather a paradox to be embraced.

Leveraging political debate to invite the culture to consider a Catholic worldview is not, of course, the only way to practice

evangelization. There are as many ways to evangelize as there are individuals, and no way is superior to another so long as they all lead to Christ and his Church. Yet engaging in political debate is certainly *one* way to evangelize, and it is a way, this book will argue, that is becoming increasingly necessary as society becomes more politicized. In the end, evangelizing always requires going to where the people are, and where many people are today is stuck in a morass of increasingly aggressive political ideologies, each one seducing its adherents down varied paths to the same dead end: moral, spiritual, and yes, political futility. There is a better option.

PART I

Foundations

## Stop Fighting—and Start Arguing

Getting into a fight is easy. Getting into an argument—that takes work. Moreover, despite the common conflation of “arguing” with “fighting”—an understandable conflation for those who watch YouTube and cable TV news—the fact is that we’d be fighting less if we were having *more* arguments with each other. The reason is because learning how to disagree is essential for reaching a durable agreement.

This theme, restoring the lost art of disagreement, forms one of the pillars of Bishop Robert Barron’s evangelization work, which he develops in *Arguing Religion: A Bishop Speaks at Facebook and Google*. In this short book, Barron lays out a rhetorical framework for engaging in moral, philosophical, and religious argumentation, especially with those who identify as “nones” (those who eschew all religious traditions). The framework enables constructive debate among individuals who hold, or appear to hold, profoundly different worldviews.

Barron’s first two principles—paraphrased, “Do not pit reason against faith” and “Overcome scientism”—identify two epistemological foundations to productive disagreement. As noted previously, the contemporary assertion that “faith” is, at best, independent of reason and, at worst, repugnant to reason is, in fact, *unreasonable*. As Barron writes,

Authentic faith is not . . . infrarational; it is suprarational. The infrarational—what lies below reason—is the stuff of credulity, superstition, naiveté, or just plain stupidity, and no self-respecting adult should be the least bit interested in fostering or embracing it. It is quite properly shunned by mature religious people as it is by scientists and philosophers. The suprarational, on the other hand, is what lies beyond reason but never stands in contradiction to reason. It is indeed a type of knowing, but one that surpasses the ordinary powers of observation, experimentation, hypothesis formation, or rational reflection.<sup>1</sup>

In short, constructive debate requires refraining from playing “epistemic gatekeeping” with debate participants insisting, for example, that no “religious arguments” can be used to make one’s moral and political case. Twentieth-century philosophers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas dedicated much of their careers to defending such gatekeeping by contending that all public claims (e.g., explaining why you oppose a law) must be free from “religious” content. Yet their arguments ultimately fall flat for two reasons. First, as noted earlier, they cut against the historical experience of “religious language” effectively producing moral progress in society, which we see paradigmatically in figures like Abraham Lincoln, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr, and Cesar Chavez; and second, what counts as “rational” in civil debate is, or at least should be, *part of the debate itself*. (I will further develop this point in the next chapter.) In recasting the relationship between “faith” and “reason” as potentially complementary, Bishop Barron is thus highlighting that constructive debate necessitates opening the mind to *all* possible forms of evidence and being willing to use *all* tools at our disposal, including tools that do not fall neatly

1. Robert Barron, *Arguing Religion: A Bishop Speaks at Facebook and Google* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2018), 7–8.

into narrow secular definitions of “rationality.” To be sure, some viewpoints will, indeed, emerge as “infrarational”—as contrary to reason—in the process, but that’s the point: we have to get all the positions on the table before we can start the sorting.

This leads to Bishop Barron’s second condition for constructive debate: overcoming scientism. Scientism, according to Barron, is “the reduction of all knowledge to the scientific form of knowing.”<sup>2</sup> The consequence of this viewpoint is that all knowledge that falls outside the scope of empirical verifiability is epistemically indistinguishable from irrational emotive assertion (i.e., “I believe it because I feel it”). Scientism has become dominant in secular culture, especially among young people, a reality captured in the popular internet meme, “Dude, do you even science?” (or its variant, “Do you even science, bro?”). The meme encapsulates the sentiment that only an idiot would believe something that isn’t “scientific.”

Unfortunately for the bros (and brosettes) who think this way, scientism is logically incoherent and self-defeating. As Bishop Barron points out,

The entire program of scientism rests squarely upon a contradiction. The principle is that the only meaningful statements are those that can be confirmed through empirical observation and experimentation; and yet, that very principle is not confirmable in such a manner. Where or how does one observe or experimentally verify that meaningfulness is reducible to that which can be observed through the senses?<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the claim “only scientific knowledge is meaningful knowledge” is not possible to defend empirically. This is for two related reasons. First, the meaning of the terms

2. Barron, 17.

3. Barron, 20–21.

themselves, both individually and in relation to each other, are not raw pieces of empirical material reality; they are *interpretations* of empirical material reality and, as such, do not exist “purely” as empirical reality itself. That may sound abstract, but think of it this way: How, from an empirical perspective, would it be possible to observe and, even less, quantify and test “meaningfulness” or “knowledge” or “science-ness” in and of itself? The whole enterprise would depend on adopting an a priori—that is, prior to observation—definition of the content of each term, which means that empiricism is not *sui generis* or self-justifying but rather conceptually relies on non-empirical rational categories. Put more colloquially, you must define what you seek to observe before you can go about observing it. (For those with interest in the history of philosophy, this is similar to the case that rationalist philosopher extraordinaire Immanuel Kant made against the self-described empiricist David Hume, which we will examine in later chapters).

Second, even if we could empirically define each term in the claim that “only scientific knowledge is meaningful knowledge,” we would still have no scientific means to determine whether such a claim is, in fact, empirically true. The reason is that, methodologically, there is no way to set up an experiment that could test the empirical validity of the statement, because *such a statement cannot possibly be falsified*, which is the sole standard for determining scientific truth.

Falsifiability, in the scientific method, means being able to imagine an outcome in which your hypothesis could turn out to be false. So, for example, past medical practitioners seeking to empirically verify the cause of why some of their patients had yellow eyes must have said to themselves, “I hypothesize that the cause of yellow eyes is in the eye itself; however, it is at least possible that the cause may lie elsewhere in the body.” This “it is possible that the cause lies elsewhere in the body” is the introduction of falsifiability into the practitioners’ scientific reasoning. Indeed,

this example—using experimentation to discover the true cause of jaundice—shows the power of the scientific method in action: precisely because doctors were conceptually able to imagine that the cause of yellow eyes could lie outside the eyes, even if that seemed counterintuitive at the time, they were able to conduct experiments that eventually led them to identify a liver deficiency, not an eye deficiency, as the culprit. Falsifiability, in other words, eventually led them to the truth.

The problem with the claim that “only scientific knowledge is meaningful knowledge,” however, is that it cannot be falsified using the scientific method. Indeed, scientifically testing the claim would be like a scientist saying, “I am going to conduct an experiment to see whether the color ‘pure white’ exists in nature by using these red-tinted glasses.” Given the nature of the question and the method chosen to pursue it, the “result” to the experiment is already contained within the experiment itself.

We can see this issue with empiricism more directly by setting it up in the form of a syllogism or structured argument (I’ll say more about the structure of arguments later in this chapter):

Premise 1: Only knowledge acquired by the senses is meaningful.

Premise 2: Science is the only means by which we acquire knowledge by the senses.

Conclusion: Therefore, only knowledge acquired by science is meaningful.

Expressed this way, scientism provides a paradigmatic example of begging the question. In the language of logic, “begging the question” means avoiding the central issue at stake. The central issue in this context, the issue we must settle before moving on to any other issue, is *whether it is true* that only knowledge acquired by the senses is meaningful. It certainly may be accurate to claim that science, broadly speaking, represents the only

means by which we (reliably) acquire sensory knowledge (the second premise in the argument); yet that statement alone tells us nothing about the truth status of the first premise, the claim that only sensory knowledge is meaningful. And the problem is that we cannot coherently use “science” to provide an answer to that without engaging in circular reasoning.

A classic example of begging the question uses the Bible to drive home the fallacy at play here (and, by the way, this is *not* the reasoning the Church employs to defend the Bible’s authority). One person asks, “Is the Bible true?” to which the other responds, “Yes.” “Why?” says the first. “Because the Bible says so,” responds the second. The “reasoning” embedded in this statement rightly drives science-loving people nuts. They could reply, “But we need something *outside* the Bible to determine whether what the Bible says about itself is true—something can’t just appeal to itself to justify its own authority!” That is an excellent point. Yet shouldn’t we also therefore conclude that science cannot appeal to itself to justify its own authority and, even less, to justify the claim that nothing “outside of science” is objectively meaningful?

This, ultimately, is the problem with scientism. The reduction of all meaningful knowledge to the domain of the empirical is, translated, the same as asserting “the scientific method is the only way to determine what is true because only the scientific method can determine truth.” Adopting this position is, analogously, no different from adopting the position that the Bible is true because the Bible says so. It is a sheer, circular appeal to asserted authority.

As Bishop Barron emphasizes, however, critiquing scientism is *not* a critique of science itself. The scientific method can, indeed, give us bountiful information about the workings of the universe and has been indispensable in vastly improving standards of living across the globe. But science is strictly methodologically limited and, as such, can neither justify its own existence nor serve as the sole epistemic foundation for argumentation, especially moral argumentation. It is a tool, not a totality, and, as such, can be *one*

of the resources at our disposal when engaging in debates—but only one.

Another presupposition for constructive debate is Barron's principle "Avoid voluntarism." Voluntarism is "the trumping of the intellect by the will" and the view that "things are true because I want them to be true."<sup>4</sup> Voluntarism rivals scientism's influence in secular culture. Unlike scientism, however, voluntarism does not even feign rationality and, as such, is much more poisonous to civil discussion. Scientism can at least argue about science with rational authority; voluntarism, on the other hand, denies the existence of objective, universal rational principles altogether and thus cannot make a rational case for anything. This viewpoint appears in the commonplace assertions, "You have your truth, I have mine"; "Who are you to judge?"; "All values are relative"; "No culture is superior to another"; and "I want my outside to match my inside," which encapsulates the voluntaristic belief that individuals can, by sheer acts of will, define the nature, meaning, and purpose of their physical body independently of objective (including scientific) reality, especially in matters of gender and sexual behavior (though curiously, given the logic of the position, not in race, age, disability, class, privilege, etc.).

Voluntarism is completely incoherent; to assert that there is no universal truth beyond an individual's own definition of truth is to embrace a universal truth. Moreover, as we will see in the chapter on progressivism, it is distinctively destructive when socialized and repackaged as a political ideology. However, here it is sufficient to observe that adopting a voluntaristic position sabotages the possibility of debate even before the first word has been uttered. As Bishop Barron puts it, "When voluntarism holds sway, there is no room for argument, for truth has become utterly individualized and relativized."<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that

4. Barron, 37.

5. Barron, 44.

rejecting voluntarism as a condition for debate is not to impose any limitations on the method or content of the conversation. Quite the opposite, it is to make the exchange of ideas possible in the first place. Without stipulating as a minimal requirement for civil discussion that all parties must be willing to offer *reasons* to support their viewpoints beyond a self-righteous “because I say so,” there is no way to rationally apprehend and, even less, evaluate each other’s positions. The best that voluntarism can produce is performative public tantrums.

The final conditions Bishop Barron identifies can be summarized as *dispositions* for constructive debate. They include seeking to understand your opponent’s position and being intolerant of toleration. What unites both is an idea that may sound quaint to contemporary ears but nevertheless still undergirds all worthwhile public (and much private) discussion: *seek the truth*. Understanding your opponent’s position serves two interrelated functions in this regard: It enables you to comprehend the other’s point of view on its own terms while, in the process, spurring you to refine your position in response. Barron draws on St. John Henry Newman to highlight the importance of this “back and forth” among competing positions:

When we take an idea in, we do not dumbly receive it, but instead, we turn it over, look at it from different angles, tease out its implications, etc. And then, in a manner of a game, we toss it back to a fellow player, who does much the same thing. In this sifting process, all of an idea’s aspects are allowed to come into the light. Jumping on a question or a challenge with a put-down or a quip or a canned argument simply shuts down this indispensable process.<sup>6</sup>

6. Barron, 47–48.

Central to playing the game of truth-seeking is knowing the opponent's position at least as well, if not better, than he or she does. This is important not only, or even primarily, so that you can end up “winning” the debate, but rather so that you can confirm *to yourself* that you hold the position you do not because it's “yours” but because it is the best—that is to say, most truthful—position as far as you can discern.

This commitment to an ongoing, ever-refining confirmation that one's beliefs can withstand the highest levels of scrutiny points to the other disposition: being intolerant of toleration. Some beliefs are mutually exclusive: God either exists or does not; humans either have an immortal soul or they don't; there is either a universal human good or there isn't. As Barron bluntly observes, “Someone has to be wrong.”<sup>7</sup> While toleration is an indispensable principle in a pluralistic society, it cannot be the only and, even less, the foundational principle because there must be *some* shared conception of truth that unites society—that makes it a “society” at all—in the first place. We don't have to agree on everything, but we do have to agree on something, and merely “agreeing to disagree” won't cut it when it comes to the constitutive laws and values of a society. “Toleration,” in short, cannot sustain itself either in principle (“toleration” would have to tolerate all forms of “intolerance”) or in practice (“toleration” would have to tolerate all attempts to destroy it).

Pointing out the limits of toleration is not to justify violence or the threat of violence as a means to advance one's viewpoint. Again, much the opposite, it is to give life to the purpose of argumentation itself, which is, ultimately, not merely to *seek* a common truth but to *practice* a common truth, a truth that is not reducible to individual or group preference and, as such, protects both individuals and groups from the tyranny of other individual and group preferences. In this sense, transcending

7. Barron, 33.

toleration in the name of shared principles is the best hope we have of establishing and maintaining a peaceful society. As Bishop Barron puts it, “Argument is the way to turn even fierce opponents into allies.”<sup>8</sup> I would add that it’s the *only* way. The lone alternative to argument in the pursuit of truth is aggression in the pursuit of power.

#### THE ANATOMY OF AN ARGUMENT

It’s one thing to recognize the conditions that make constructive debate possible. But what about the arguments themselves? How can anyone go about making a determination on the intellectual merits of what another is claiming? Doesn’t it all come down to opinion in the end?

No—and a brief anecdote helps show why. Around fourth grade, our children began being taught the difference between a “fact” and an “opinion” as part of the instruction on how to write elementary essays. This knowledge, they believed, seemed to endow them with superpowers, for with it they could immediately disarm their parents of moral authority. Here’s an example:

Child: Can I sleep downstairs in front of the TV tonight?

Mom and Dad: No.

Child: Why not?

Mom and Dad: Because you are always grumpy the next day and unpleasant to be around.

Child: No, I’m not.

Mom and Dad: Yes, you are.

Child: No, I’m not. It’s just your opinion that I get grumpy, and you can’t force your opinion on anyone.

8. Barron, 36.

Mom and Dad: [in our heads: *oh yes we can*] Okay, but it's just your opinion that it is our opinion that you get grumpy—and that's a fact.

Child: [confused; after extended pause] Okay, what if I put away all the laundry on the couch.

Mom and Dad: Deal.

The “fact” vs. “opinion” distinction is a good learning tool and helpful heuristic for thinking through an issue in dispute (What here is “fact,” what here is “opinion”?). But, of course, the distinction between “fact” and “opinion” itself rests upon a claim that there actually *is* a difference between fact and opinion in the first place. Is that claim a fact? Or is it an opinion? Can an opinion be factual? Can something factual just be someone's opinion? How in the world can we begin to sort any of this out?

The answer is that we isolate the argument being made, break it up into its parts, and then critically evaluate each component both individually and in relation to the other components. The eminent Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft has made a wealth of arguments in support of the intellectual integrity of Catholicism, but one of his most valuable contributions is his breakdown of the anatomy of an argument itself. Arguments can be immensely complex. However, the criteria to understand and assess arguments, both individually and knitted together into complex systems, are relatively simple. In *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics: Reasoned Answers to Questions of Faith*, Kreeft and his co-author, Fr. Ronald Tacelli, SJ, lay the foundation for apologetics (reasoned defense of the truth of Catholicism) on three basic concepts, which the authors call the “three acts of the mind,” and three corresponding *modes of expression* of those acts of the mind. The acts of the mind are understanding, judging, and reasoning, and the corresponding modes of expression are terms, propositions,

and arguments.<sup>9</sup> (So, understanding relates to terms, judging to propositions, and reasoning to arguments.)

The argument about arguments is straightforward, but it is easy to get tripped up on the terminology, so let me start with an example. Here is a simple syllogism—that is, a deductive argument—against abortion:

Premise 1: It is wrong to kill innocent human life.

Premise 2: Humans in the womb are innocent human life.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill humans in the womb.

The terms in this syllogism are the words that exist in the two premises and conclusion, including “kill,” “innocent,” “human,” “life,” “womb,” etc. The propositions are the statements in the two premises that bind the terms together—i.e., “It is wrong to kill innocent human life” and “Humans in the womb are innocent human life.” The argument is the *relationship* between the premises (the propositions) that leads to the conclusion “Therefore, it is wrong to kill humans in the womb.” Connecting this to the three operations of the mind, it is the rational power of understanding that evaluates terms, the rational power of judging that evaluates propositions, and the rational power of reasoning that evaluates arguments.

There is one more tool we need to add here: the *criteria* that the powers of the mind employ to assess terms, propositions, and arguments. The criterion for assessing terms is clarity—that is, is the meaning of the term clear or unclear, or, in other words, has the term been defined unambiguously? The criterion for assessing propositions is truth and falsity—that is, is the statement (the

9. Peter J. Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics: Reasoned Answers to Questions of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 17.

collection of terms) being made true or not true? Finally, the criterion for assessing argument is validity—that is, determining whether the conclusion resulting from the propositions necessarily follows.

A bit more detail is helpful for explaining the last criterion before returning to our abortion example. Here is a classic example of a *valid* argument, meaning an argument whose conclusion necessarily follows from its premises (and by “necessarily” I mean that our mind cannot conceive of another possibility, in the same way that, logically, our mind cannot conceive of  $0 + 0$  equaling anything other than 0):

Premise 1: All humans are mortal.

Premise 2: Matthew is a human.

Conclusion: Therefore, Matthew is mortal.

This is a *valid* argument; the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. Here, however, is an example of an *invalid* argument:

Premise 1: All humans are mortal.

Premise 2: Matthew is a human.

Conclusion: Therefore, Matthew is worthy of respect.

Note that despite the fact that each proposition in this argument is true and, at least for the sake of illustration, there is no ambiguity in the terms, this second argument is *invalid*—the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premises. Indeed, we could call it a *non sequitur* (Latin for “it does not follow”). There is nothing about the propositions in and of themselves that logically leads to the conclusion about humanity conferring “respect” on any given human, including “Matthew.” We would need additional premises, additional propositions, to establish that causal relationship validly. Invalid arguments, logically speaking, are indistinguishable from nonsense.

There's one more block to lay in the foundation here. An argument being valid in and of itself is not logically sufficient to induce assent (meaning to compel your mind to agree with it) for this reason: An argument can contain both ambiguous terms and contradictory propositions and still be valid. Here's an example drawn from contemporary events:

Premise 1: Violence in service of a good cause is peaceful.

Premise 2: Tearing down the system is a good cause.

Conclusion: Therefore, violence in service of tearing down the system is peaceful.

*What?* You might say. *This makes no sense.* You're right—it doesn't. Not only does the syllogism contain ambiguous terms (What, for example, do "good cause" and "tearing down" and "system" mean specifically here?), but the first proposition is contradictory: violence, by definition, is *not peaceful*. It may be warranted to claim that violence is necessary to protect or restore peace; however, the claim here is that violence = peace and peace = violence. It is an example of pure sophistry. And yet, the argument remains valid, notwithstanding the problems with the terms and propositions, because the conclusion still follows from the premises.

The point, therefore, is that having a valid argument is a *necessary but insufficient condition* for making a rationally persuasive case. The standard we're ultimately aiming for is called *soundness* in the language of logic. A sound argument is a valid argument that also has true propositions, which, in turn, also have unambiguous terms. And here's the most important take-away from all these terminological distinctions: If an argument is, indeed, sound, then the human mind cannot rationally account for why it would disagree. In other words, disagreeing with a sound argument is *irrational*. It would be a form of voluntarism (i.e., "I don't believe it because I don't want to believe it").

With all this on the table, let's return to the abortion argument to tie the pieces together and see why understanding the components of an argument matters. The argument, again, is:

Premise 1: It is wrong to kill innocent human life.

Premise 2: Humans in the womb are innocent human life.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill humans in the womb.

Is this a good argument? Is it worthy of rational assent? Let's apply Kreeft's and Fr. Tacelli's tools. First, are the terms clear? It seems so. It's fair to say, I believe, that anyone reading this argument who understands English would have a shared, if basic, comprehension of the definitions of "is-ness," "wrongness," "killing," "innocence," "human-ness," "life," prepositionally being "in" something, and "womb." So, at least in a basic sense, the argument seems to pass the clarity tests. There does not appear to be any significant ambiguity.

How about the propositions? Recall, the criterion of assessment for propositions is truth and falsity. This can be trickier to evaluate because it requires a deeper dive into the grounds and justification not only of "truth" per se but of "moral truth" in particular. Yet we can still make a tentative judgment this way: What are the implications if the claim "It is wrong to kill innocent human life" were *not* true? Applying the logical principles of noncontradiction (something cannot be true and false at the same time in the same way) and the excluded middle (something must be either true or false), it would mean, expressed negatively, that it is *not* wrong to kill innocent human life or, expressed positively, that killing innocent human life is morally acceptable. This is a position someone could take (and some abortion extremists do take); however, it logically commits the person who adopts this view to accepting that human life can

justifiably be snuffed out even if the human is innocent—that is, even if, as is implicit in the definition of “innocence,” the human is not a threat and has not committed a crime. Even utilitarian philosophers and real-politick just-war theorists who argue that the killing of innocent life may sometimes be justified in order to save other innocent lives (which is not the Catholic position, it is important to stress) still recognize the truth of the general moral principle “killing innocent human life is wrong.” Indeed, it is this principle, they would argue, that supplies the exception to the general moral rule itself (i.e., they recognize there are exceptions to the immorality of killing innocent human life in order to protect innocent human life). Rejecting the truth of the premise “It is wrong to kill innocent human life” is thus extremist, to say the least. Consequently, the truth of the first premise is at least rationally plausible.

How about the second premise—“Humans in the womb are innocent life”? Is this premise true or false? Again, the assessment can get complex because of the difficulty of identifying and justifying the grounding of moral truth. But we can make a tentative judgment here as well. To say that the proposition “Humans in the womb are innocent human life” is *false* would require denying one or more of the following: (1) humans in the womb are, in fact, human (if not human, what are they?), (2) humans in the womb are, in fact, “life” (if they are not alive, what could possibly define “life?”), and/or (3) humans in the womb are, in fact, innocent (if not innocent, what could they possibly be guilty of and what human could possibly be categorized as *more* innocent than an unborn child?). Again, we can find people who take these positions, including those who are willing to call unborn babies “parasites” to protest abortion restrictions.<sup>10</sup> However, adopting this viewpoint would entail embracing a radical re-definition of

10. See, for example, Dan MacGuill, “Did Pro-Choice Protesters Carry a Sign that Likened Fetuses to ‘Parasites?’” Snopes, June 12, 2019, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/parasites-rights-abortion-sign/>.

basic biology (i.e., life in the womb is not a living human) and morality (life in the womb is not innocent). The second premise thus can also plausibly claim the mantle of being true.

At this point, let's say, for the sake of illustration, it is justified to conclude both that the terms in the propositions are clear (unambiguous) and that the propositions themselves are true. The argument is passing rational muster up to this point. Yet what about the argument's *validity*? Does it necessarily logically follow that if it is wrong to kill innocent human life and if humans in the womb are innocent human life then it is wrong to kill humans in the womb? Although we could again ask deeper philosophical questions about both the nature of logic and why our minds function the way they do, it's not clear how we could reach any other conclusion. By the sheer authority of the rules of rational deduction, denying that the first two premises of the argument lead to the conclusion "It is wrong to kill babies in the womb" would be rationally analogous to denying that  $0 + 0 = 0$ . To be sure, someone could say that he denies the validity of the argument, just as I could say that I was born without biological parents. Yet—and this sounds revolutionary to contemporary secular culture—*saying* something does not make it so. If an argument is valid, it is valid no matter what we feel about it. And, in the case of this argument, it's not clear how we could rationally conclude that it is not valid.

So let's put it all together: If the terms are clear, the propositions are true, and the relationship between the propositions and the conclusion is valid, what, then, do we have before us? The answer is a *sound argument*—an argument that can only be denied on pain of self-contradiction. *If* I believe that it is wrong to kill innocent human life *and* that humans in the womb are, in fact, innocent human life, *then* I cannot *not* believe—"believe" in the sense of rationally assent to—that it is wrong to kill innocent humans in the womb, which is another way of saying that abortion is wrong.

THE RECALCITRANT WILL CAN'T KILL  
THE OBEDIENT MIND

Applying Kreeft's and Fr. Tacelli's principles to the abortion example, even in its highly simplified form, shows the enduring power of rationality to formulate, communicate, and defend a point of view and, conversely, to identify flaws in competing views. One of the "settled truths" of contemporary secular culture is that there is no rational way to settle political questions because "rationality" is subjective and open to infinite interpretations. Yet a quick examination of how it functions in and through the actions of the mind reveals how false this "privatized" definition of rationality is. Reason can, indeed, guide us to common moral principles.

To be sure, we are all tempted to cling to beliefs on the voluntaristic grounds that we want them to be true because they align with our (misdirected) desires. The "dear self" in all of us, as Immanuel Kant called it, is, indeed, a vacillating despot who wants to treat the truth as if it were a lump of wax whose only purpose is to bear our covetous seal, reality be damned. Yet one of the abiding gifts of human nature is that we can never extinguish the light of reason, desperately try as we may. We can bury it under sundry sedimentary layers of (self) deceit, (self) manipulation, (willful) ignorance, sophisticated misinformation, propaganda, sloganeering, and the like; we can, to shift the metaphor, blow and blow and blow in frantic attempts to extinguish the flame so that we can finally do whatever the hell we want in the dark, delusionally thinking, like a two-year-old covering his eyes (or Adam and Eve hiding in the garden), that the truth can't see us because we've made ourselves blind. But, in the end, trying to kill reason only reaffirms its invulnerability. Just as the condition for the possibility of telling a lie is the existence of the truth, so too the condition for the possibility of *denying* the existence of reason is the existence of reason itself. To say and understand the words "There is no such thing as rationality" or "Rationality

has no authority,” we must be eminently rational beings, whether we like it or not.<sup>11</sup>

Kreeft and Tacelli aptly summarize the power of a good rational argument:

Arguments are like eyes: they see reality. . . . To disagree with the conclusion of any argument, it must be shown that either an ambiguous term or false premise or a logical fallacy exists in that argument. Otherwise, to say “I still disagree” is to say “You have proved your conclusion true, but I am so stubborn and foolish that I will not accept this truth. I insist on living in a false world, not a true one.”<sup>12</sup>

Avoiding living in a false world may sound academic and detached from everyday concerns. But that assessment rapidly changes the moment someone or some group comes along and tries to conscript you into their ideological fantasy. Once you discover they are not going to leave you alone and are intent on you joining their cause (or else), it becomes clear that there are only four options to respond: You can run. You can submit. You can bloody your knuckles. Or you can craft a better argument and make your case boldly.

If the last option sounds awkward and burdensome, consider the alternatives.

11. Put differently, saying, “I don’t believe in reason,” is analogous to saying, “I don’t believe I was born”—in both cases, the condition for the possibility of the statement is the existence of that which the statement is denying.

12. Kreeft and Tacelli, *Handbook of Catholic Apologetics*, 18.