Political, social, and cultural developments in recent years have imparted a new sense of urgency to reflections on the changing relationship between faith and culture throughout the world. Those reflections at one stage focused on speculations concerning how culture would be reshaped when its religious foundations had been repudiated and eradicated. But in recent years we find terms such as “the death of the death of God” used in a book title by Jacob Neusner and “desecularization” in a book title by Peter Berger, and the questions in the foreground now pertain to the proper relationship between faith and cultural-political life in the face of the persistence of religious belief.

The current state of such questions is anticipated aptly in a pair of lectures given by Malcolm Muggeridge in 1978: “The End of Christendom,” and “But Not of Christ.” Muggeridge offers a personal witness to the efforts in the twentieth century to destroy Christianity especially in the Soviet Union and presciently reports that those efforts in the Soviet Union had failed—and this before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the success of Solidarity in Poland, and the implosion of the Soviet regime and empire. It is not coincidental to the account given in these lectures that Muggeridge himself converted to Christianity and just a few years after delivering these lectures became a Catholic.
The end of Christendom in Muggeridge’s terms indicates the collapse of a civilization in which Christianity is deeply entwined in the political, social, and cultural structures of power. He sees in the twentieth century a parallel to what St. Augustine encountered when faced with the collapse of Rome: the inevitable transience of historical civilizations in contrast to which the eternity that comes to light through Christianity shines out all the more clearly, as he envisions anew Augustine’s distinction between the ephemeral City of Man and the everlasting City of God. Muggeridge in these essays offers witness to what he understands to be a great historical period of transition, and his reminder in the lectures that he speaks as a journalist and not as a scholar seems apt. His account imparts a personal character to the movement of history especially as he reports what he has witnessed of the failed effort in the Soviet Union to destroy Christianity and of the resurgence of Christian truth through the great figure of Solzhenitsyn as well as through his sense of moral and cultural decline in the West. To his credit, Muggeridge in the second essay, “But Not [the End] of Christ,” recognizes the danger of egoism involved in crafting denunciations of the culture around him and applies self-restraint as he falls back upon the hope that flows from his own deeply held Christian faith.

Muggeridge can be viewed in these lectures as establishing the ground for a new set of challenges that he himself does not fully address—at one moment he movingly speaks of himself as living in the vicinity of death (although he lived for another twelve years after delivering these lectures), and while he knows that Christ and Christianity will live on beyond what he sees as the end of Christendom, he does not ask what new relationships between Christianity and political and cultural life might emerge in a new historical period. Perhaps Muggeridge was not well prepared for such questions because in these lectures he focuses on Christ and on great Christian thinkers and artists such as Newman and Dostoyevsky but does not bring into focus Christ’s presence in the world through the Christian church. In any case, one measure of historical development
in the three decades since Muggeridge delivered these lectures is that new questions about how Christianity should participate in contemporary public and cultural affairs are being thoughtfully and energetically pursued.

Among the many important initiatives in this area—and of course The Institute on Religion and Public Life and its journal, *First Things,* must be lauded in this context—is a new organization called “Theos: A Public Theology Think Tank,” launched in November 2006 with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, Archbishop of Westminster. The first report issued by Theos, “‘Doing God’: A Future for Faith in the Public Square,” provides an engaging and comprehensive account of the place of faith in public life especially in the United Kingdom but globally as well. The report draws on a variety of theological sources as well as research in political science that ascertains the continuing pervasive involvement of religion in political life throughout the world to establish “why it is simply not possible to take faith out of the public arena.” Addressing some of the foremost arguments against the involvement of faith in public affairs, the report develops a nuanced understanding of the ways in which people of faith must learn to bring faith to bear in public affairs while acknowledging the political and cultural complexity of contemporary public discourse. The report moves well beyond the important reminder that Christianity is not “an inherently private phenomenon” by offering substantial arguments for the proposition that “the secular public square, properly understood, is a Christian legacy and one that requires an ongoing Christian presence to remain true to itself.”

The report also offers reasons why religion will become increasingly important in public affairs in the coming years. As people come increasingly to recognize that wealth is not the same as life satisfaction, the concept of well-being emerges as a matter of social and political concern, and this concept is most fully illuminated by religious traditions. And as religious identity becomes again a prominent factor in the global politics of identity, the development
of public discourse capable of mediating such deeply-grounded identities will become an indispensable component of cultural interaction. As Rowan Williams and Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor state in their foreword to the report, “religiously-inspired public engagement need not be sectarian and can, in fact, be radically inclusive. . . . Faith is not just important for human flourishing and the renewal of society but . . . society can only flourish if faith is given space to make its contribution and its challenge.”

Another powerful account of the ways in which Christian intelligence can shape contemporary political and cultural life is provided by a new collection of essays published as the first volume of The John Henry Cardinal Newman Lectures, _The Person and the Polis_, edited by CraigSteven Titus. Titus in his introduction poses the question to which the essays respond: “Can freedom and democracy flourish without Christian intelligence in the West? Can the serious academic pursuit of truth, especially in the human sciences, survive in the airless clime of anti-religious relativism?” Essays by Kenneth L. Schmitz, Daniel N. Robinson, Robert P. George, Hadley Arkes, Paul C. Vitz, Michael Novak, and Romanus Cessario offer what Titus calls “an integrated vision of the human person and the democratic polis.” The concluding essay in the volume by Romanus Cessario brings to the foreground the presence and activity of the Church in culture: “Without the Church of Christ, there would be no flourishing of virtue in the ‘secular state.’ . . . Neither person nor polis flourish outside of Christ.” The essay concludes with the observation that the Spirit is at work in human culture through human action: “There is no such thing . . . as a purely supernatural activity. Grace builds on nature.” Consequently, the challenging task of reflecting on the interaction of grace and nature must be pursued as we participate in reshaping public political and cultural life in a manner that is intelligently informed by faith.

The first article in this issue addresses these issues as they come to appearance in judgments made by the United States Supreme
Court. In “Religion Interfacing with Law and Politics: Three Tired Ideas in the Jurisprudence of Religion,” L. Scott Smith examines the way in which the Supreme Court has dealt with the principle of religious freedom set out in the Bill of Rights. Smith establishes his theme and his position early in the article: “At the risk of being branded a constitutional heretic, maverick, or radical, I may as well show my hand all at once rather than piecemeal. The jurisprudential ideas that have occasioned enormous mischief and for which I have low regard are separationism, neutrality, and coercion.” The concept of separationism concerns the determination of the extent to which the exercise of state power leaves room for the exercise of religious practices, and Smith argues that this concept is necessarily political in content: “Separationism, a doctrine that lies at the heart of church-state relations in this country, has no meaning independent of politics. A Lockean and a Marxist, for example, will not interpret the separation of church and state in the same way, precisely because their respective views of the state drastically differ.” Neutrality, according to Smith, is “an instrumental, or second-order, value,” meaning that it always serves other values, and here again he argues that the term has no meaning independent of political positions concerning the power of the state. Coercion too “must always be understood relative to political ideology,” according to Smith’s argument. If based on political views a particular constraint such as laws forbidding smoking in restaurants is regarded as contributing to the welfare of the state, then such constraint is regarded as benevolent, but if based on political views such constraints are regarded as harmful then they are deemed coercive. Smith’s conclusion is that a jurisprudence of religion must be developed that does not depend on these three doctrines, and the purpose of the article is to push these concepts aside so that a more fruitful jurisprudence of religion can be developed.

Another aspect of the relationship between faith and culture involves the relationship between theology or religion and philoso-
logy, between faith and reason. A number of modern philosophers have attempted to eliminate questions of a religious nature from the boundaries of philosophical thought, and Alice von Hildebrand makes it clear that she regards such philosophers as evading important and inevitable questions that pertain to the meaning of existence. Her article “Platonism: An Atrium to Christianity” examines the theological dimensions of Plato’s philosophical writings and argues that his ideas concerning “God, the immortality of the soul, good and evil, truth and error, real evils (immorality) and relative evils” demonstrate the capacity of reason rightly understood and properly exercised to approach some of the essential questions that find full illumination only within the light of Christian revelation. The article explores what it means to call Plato a “precursor of Christ” who recognizes that “the key issue . . . is God’s existence, for the answer given to that question will give human life an orientation that is decisive.” Von Hildebrand reflects on the remarkable extent to which Plato anticipates key issues in Christianity, including “the obligation to protect the weak, orphans, and strangers” and especially his recognition of the ultimate dignity of the human soul as displayed in the claim made by Socrates in the Gorgias that it is better to suffer injustice than to harm one’s own soul by committing an unjust act.

James A. Harold in “The Importance of Unity and Intelligibility: Reconciling Philosophy, the Sciences, and our Lived Experience” seeks an understanding of human experience in which different modes of knowing and engaging with the world can be reconciled and recognized as occurring within an underlying unity of experience. The question addressed by the article emerges from the differentiation of experience and thought into the familiar diversity of categories through which we operate in the contemporary world such as economic, political, and moral. (The popular term used to convey a life lived in accord with maintaining sharp differentiations among such areas is “compartmentalization.”) Harold focuses upon the differentiations that are delineated by philosophy, the empiri-
cal sciences, and our lived experience and states his goal in these words: “to take seriously the idea of the unity of all truth and to show that despite the differences involved in these disciplines, work can be done to integrate them into a single vision of reality. Thus, the content presented to us by philosophy, empirical sciences, and our lived experience should be (in principle) reconcilable.” He finds the ground of such unity in experiences such as wonder and establishes that a concept such as beauty can be seen as a bridge between diverse ways of knowing, and the article explores the role of beauty especially in the sciences and mathematics. Harold concludes by recognizing that the diverse modes of knowing, each with its distinctive access to truth, carry us toward a fuller understanding of the truth to which they all are directed.

The relation between music and faith is brought to light by H. Wendell Howard in “Handel’s Messiah in Dublin.” Howard recounts the story of Handel’s declining reputation in London prior to the first performances of his Messiah; as a result, the premier of the oratorio was in Dublin, where it was enthusiastically received. Howard points out that such a warm reception was surprising because Catholic-Protestant antagonisms were intense in Ireland. After providing a rich account of such antagonisms and of their implications for the reception of Handel’s work, Howard suggests that the musical qualities of the work transcended sectarian tensions: “Handel once again found himself a musical hero; this time, however, the setting was Dublin, not London, and the reason was a work that presented Christianity without denominational coloring.”

Science and religion are frequently viewed as in conflict by many contemporary works in popular culture and behind such depictions looms a potent question: if science has not already disproved the claims of religion, will not the progress of science inevitably do so someday soon? Marie I. George takes up one particular form in which such a question could be posed: could scientific contact with an intelligent extraterrestrial being (an ET) invalidate Christian claims to truth? Her article “ET Meets Jesus Christ: A Hos-
tile Encounter between Science and Religion?” brings to light the controversy concerning the reconcilability of Christianity with the existence of extraterrestrial intelligent life if such life should one day be discovered. The article focuses especially on an examination of Scripture and scriptural claims that “the central event in the universe’s history was the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ.” While articulating the position that scientific discoveries leading to contact with intelligent extraterrestrial life could not undermine Christianity, George develops a view based on a reading of Scripture that the existence of such life is unlikely.

This issue concludes with an article on the work of University Notre Dame political science professor Stanley Parry and with our Reconsiderations feature offering two essays by his colleague in the political science department professor Gerhart Niemeyer. John A. Gueguen, Jr., in Stanley Parry: Teacher and Prophet provides an account of Parry’s work as a teacher who developed an understanding of a contemporary civilizational crisis caused by the disruption of tradition. Parry then strove to provide his students with access to the intellectual sources of that tradition and cultivated in them the ability to reconstruct the truth available in the tradition in a manner that would meet contemporary needs.

This year marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Gerhart Niemeyer and our Reconsiderations feature offers an introduction to Niemeyer’s work in an article by James M. Rhodes titled “Gerhart Niemeyer: Seeker for the Way,” and two republished essays by Niemeyer, “What Price ‘Natural Law?’” and “The New Need for the Catholic University.” Rhodes offers a deep appreciation of Niemeyer as a thinker who “really was neither a liberal nor what is commonly taken to be a conservative. He was a conservative in the rare sense that he was a philosopher, a political theorist, a priest of Jesus Christ, and always a seeker for the divine order of being and realistic action in history.”

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Editor
Notes


3. Ibid., 10.

4. Ibid., 38.

5. Ibid., 11.


7. Ibid., 1.

8. Ibid., 15.

9. Ibid., 173.

10. Ibid.