

God and man in Trumpland

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This week, the *National Review* published [a statement to Catholics](#) opposing Donald Trump's campaign for president. Authored by right-wing eminences George Weigel and Robert George, and cosigned by an impressive list of Catholic intellectuals and leaders, the document joins a body of anti-Trump literature that is coming into its own stentorian rhetorical conventions. The celebrity candidate is "manifestly unfit" to be president, the authors say, especially when there are Republican candidates "who do not exhibit his vulgarity, oafishness, shocking ignorance, and—we do not hesitate to use the word—demagoguery."

It's an honorable effort, however doomed to irrelevance. The writerly war paint of demagoguery accusations and the spears of em-dashed unhesitancy did not reach Michigan voters in time or force to prevent the vulgar oaf from claiming a comfortable plurality in that state's primary. Whatever their effect or lack thereof, however, the Republican-aligned Christian intellectuals who are publicly opposing Trump are revealing a great deal in the arguments they choose to make.

Weigel and George start by praising the Republican Party's service to what they understand as four key Catholic social principles. The first three are debatable in detail but reasonably clear: opposition to abortion and euthanasia, defense of religiously affiliated organizations with conscientious objections to certain laws, and "rebuilding our marriage culture."

The fourth is more striking—and perhaps indicative of the problems Christian intellectuals on the Right face in understanding, much less countering, the appeal of Trumpian demagoguery. Weigel and George praise the work of the modern Republican Party in "re-establishing constitutional and limited government, according to the core Catholic social-ethical principle of subsidiarity."

A world of meaning pulses beneath this flat jargon. Subsidiarity is indeed a core Catholic principle and, religious reasoning aside, a sound one. It refers issues to the

smallest unit capable of addressing them adequately. Federal spending has, deliberately or not, reflected this principle for decades. State and local governments have a large role in determining how federal money for schools, roads, and much else will be spent. And some federal programs—including Social Security and disability benefits—consist of direct cash and in-kind benefits to households, the smallest social unit of all. While no program perfectly reflects anyone’s value system, there was never any need to “re-establish” the principle of subsidiarity in American government.

But Weigel and George seem to have something else in mind when they bring up subsidiarity: for the state to simply *do less* in the areas of education, social welfare, and infrastructure. It’s not clear that they’ve had any more influence in *promoting* this disinvestment than they have in stopping Donald Trump. Yet such disinvestment has certainly come about.

Thanks to the sequestration cuts in the federal budget and massive retrenchment in state and local governments, a vast swath of public functions are now being done more shabbily than before—or not at all. Zeal for “limited government” is turning Louisiana’s public sphere into an Ayn Randian hellscape, where [sewage bubbles up](#) into state university dormitories and child abuse claims go uninvestigated for lack of staff. In my home state of Illinois, the state has long contracted with private nonprofits to serve people in need (following the principle of subsidiarity). [Now the state has no budget](#), and my denomination’s charity [has been forced to end programs](#) serving thousands of people. There are countless examples from around the country.

Every anti-Trump manifesto from the Christian right acknowledges the grounds his supporters have for discontent. This one cites specifically “wage stagnation, grossly incompetent governance, profligate governmental spending, the breakdown of immigration law, inept foreign policy, stifling ‘political correctness.’” (That these concerns may not be fully shared by the nation’s large non-white Catholic population is not a possibility the authors raise.) But what if the very policies of carving up, closing down, and auctioning off the public sphere—in the name of limited government, subsidiarity, or whatever other principle—have themselves stoked voter discontent?

It may be that voters, whatever their religious or ideological labels, want roads to be fixed and schools to open on time and homicides to get investigated. They may not care whether those duties are funded and managed at the lowest possible level of

government or at a somewhat higher one. They may be angry that the public sphere, on which all but the richest of us depend, crumbles surrounded by staggering private opulence. That this discontent has been vented in ways that seem imprudent or shocking to those of us who explain Christianity for a living says as much about us as it does about people who flock to a demagogue.