

## What to do about tainted money

By Randall Balmer

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The relationship between Christianity and money has always been fraught. Jesus warned against the love of money, identifying it as the root of all evil. He told his followers they could not simultaneously love both God and Mammon, and he famously overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Jewish temple.

On the other hand, financial resources are essential to good works — caring for the poor, funding medical research or supporting artistic productions. But the provenance of such money sometimes raises serious questions. Should Roman Catholics, for instance, be concerned that a major funding source for Catholic nonprofit organizations also directs money to white supremacist groups and organizations that spread misinformation about the integrity of the 2020 presidential election?

According to intrepid reporting by Brian Fraga in the *National Catholic Reporter*, a “dark money” organization, Donors Trust, funds various right-wing Catholic groups such as the Thomas More Society, the Acton Institute, traditionalist Catholic parishes and the Diocese of Spokane, Wash. It also provides support for various antiabortion groups and campus organizations that advocate libertarianism and so-called original intent in their interpretation of the Constitution.

(I’ve long argued that if jurists who claim to be “originalists” were intellectually consistent, we would not have a gun crisis in this country. Surely, the “original intent” of the Founders in crafting the Second Amendment applied, first of all, to members of militias rather than individuals, as the amendment stipulates, but if you abide by the notion of “original intent,” you must concede that the Founders were thinking about muskets, not AR-15s.)

The Donors Trust support for such organizations is very likely within the bounds of legality and acceptability, even if many Americans (Catholics included) might have reservations about political proclivities of such groups. These are the same enlightened folks, after all, who celebrated the election of Donald Trump and believe that Joseph Biden, on grounds of moral turpitude, should be denied Holy Communion.

But Donors Trust money also went to other, even less edifying organizations, including the New Century Foundation and the anti-immigrant VDARE Foundation, both of which are deemed

white nationalist groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. “There’s ethnic specialization in crime,” Peter Brimelow, president of VDARE, declared in 2017. “And Hispanics do specialize in rape, particularly of children. They’re very prone to it, compared to other groups.” (Full disclosure: Brimelow occasionally showed up in my parish when I was rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington, Conn. I was unaware of his views at the time.)

The New Century Foundation is no prize, either. Readers of its magazine, *American Renaissance*, are regularly treated to gems like this: “Blacks and whites are different. When blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western civilization — any kind of civilization — disappears.”

According to the Donors Trust 990 tax return for 2020, the donor-advised group also contributed to such far-right groups as Turning Point USA, the Tea Party Patriots Foundation, the Federalist Society, the Second Amendment Foundation, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation.

As Stephen Schenck, a Catholic activist, told Fraga, “This is really dark, scary money connected with some of the most radicalized extremists on the right.”

Defenders point out that progressive organizations also tap into foundation money — from George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, for example, or Arabella Advisers or the Tides Foundation, which supports a homeless shelter in Venice, Calif., Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, Mount St. Mary’s University in Los Angeles and the University of San Francisco.

Fair enough. Dark money infects both sides of the political spectrum. But I suspect there’s a false equivalency here. The Tea Party Patriots, one of the organizations that received Donors Trust funding, helped to organize the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol last year. Turning Point USA transported busloads of domestic terrorists to Washington for Trump’s “March to Save America” rally and the ensuing assault on the Capitol, all in an effort to subvert the democratic process and keep Trump in office beyond his elected term.

Somehow, I don’t think support for educational institutions or homeless shelters rises to the level of mischief implicit in taking down duly elected officials and subverting the Constitution. Nor does it support people or organizations that claim, as Brimelow does, that foreign immigrants are “weird aliens with dubious habits.”

Should we worry about the provenance of money used to support worthy organizations? The issue has been raised anew regarding money associated with Jeffrey Epstein. Harvard University refused to return Epstein’s \$9.1 million gift, although it pledged \$200,000 to organizations that support victims of sexual assault.

Purdue University, however, scrubbed John H. Schnatter’s name from a research institute and returned his donation after the founder of Papa John’s used a racial slur. Ball State University, Schnatter’s alma mater, did the same.

Or you can take Jerry Falwell Sr.’s breezy approach to tainted money. When it became public in 1998 that Falwell was accepting funds from Sun Myung Moon, head of the Unification Church,

which most evangelicals consider a cult, Falwell was defiant. “If the American Atheists Society or Saddam Hussein himself ever sent an unrestricted gift to any of my ministries,” Falwell declared, “be assured I will operate on Billy Sunday’s philosophy: The Devil’s had it long enough, and quickly cash the check.”