



Jeff Bezos arrives before the 60th Presidential Inauguration in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Jan. 20, 2025. (AP Photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson, Pool)



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Jeff Bezos, the owner of The Washington Post, has decided to make the paper's editorial pages a hotbed of libertarianism. "We are going to be writing every day in support and defense of two pillars: personal liberties and free markets," Bezos wrote in an email to staff, which he also [published on X](#). "We'll cover other topics too of course, but viewpoints opposing those pillars will be left to be published by others." Apparently, Bezos' love of free markets does not extend to the market for ideas.

David Shipley, the editorial page editor since 2022, resigned. Full disclosure: I knew David when he was executive editor at The New Republic in the 1990s and I did some writing for the magazine. I remember him as very bright and very excited by the clash of ideas, which is why he was such a great editorial page editor at the Post. And, one suspects, it is that love for the clash of ideas that caused him to resign.

There are three core problems with Bezos' decision: He fails to grasp the way intellectual life flourishes; he embraces an ideology that, as his unilateral decision evidences, is prone to undercut what he claims to champion, liberty; and the decision is anti-Catholic.

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I love "personal liberties" as much as the next person. And, outside of North Korea, who doesn't value "free markets?" Still, in highlighting these "two pillars" to the exclusion of other civilizational pillars, and insulating them from criticism, Bezos misunderstands how ideas strengthen or atrophy. Intellectual challenges, and the need to respond to them, are how ideas deepen and stretch. Ideas need to be nimble to survive, and nimbleness comes from exercise.

Newspapers were once highly partisan and there was always some intellectual sloppiness in the conceit that journalists could aspire to attain objectivity. There is no way to avoid epistemological and anthropological questions that stand behind every story. Opinion pages, however, became a place where ideas clashed with one another. Bezos' decision evidences all the intellectual sophistication of the Red Queen shouting "[Off with their heads!](#)" in "Alice in Wonderland."

The ideological problem with Bezos' decision is, ironically, that he claims to be supporting freedom, but he is actually undermining it. Political scientist Alan Wolfe provided the liberal critique of libertarianism in a brilliant 2015 [essay](#) at Commonweal. "Where liberalism raises questions, libertarians seek answers, and always find the right ones," Wolfe wrote. "Their philosophy is an antidote to the doubt, inconsistency, and vagueness that has always been built into liberalism." He noted it is not just an ideology but "a *total* ideology."

Wolfe saw that libertarianism not only appealed to impressionable freshmen in college, living on their own for the first time, busily reading Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Libertarianism also has a special appeal to successful capitalists like Bezos. "Human nature, libertarians insist, is one thing and one thing only: the capacity to make choices based on the rational calculation of self-interest," he wrote. "Great creative capitalists, they believe, understand this; everyone else is suffering from collectivism's version of what Marxists used to call false consciousness."

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In the end, libertarianism is selfishness in faux-intellectual drag, nothing more and nothing less. It appeals to nouveau riche titans like Bezos who think they have mastered the mysteries of the market and that other mysteries can't be too much more challenging. They detest complexity and nuance and the humanities. I am reminded of Hans Urs von Balthasar's famous critique of modern, technological mindsets of the kind that Bezos embodies:

Whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed ... then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of "knowledge," and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation — a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless



is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated — a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique.

Which leads us to the third problem with Bezos' edict: No orthodox Catholic can now be published in the Post's editorial pages unless they leave their Catholicism at the door.

The anthropological premises of Catholic social thought are allergic to libertarianism. I can understand how a person can be a Catholic and a liberal, or a Catholic and a conservative, just as I know good Catholics who voted for President Donald Trump and good Catholics who voted for Kamala Harris. But one cannot reconcile libertarianism with Catholicism. It simply can't be done.

When I first started here at NCR in 2009, there was a sustained effort by groups like the [Acton Institute](#) to bring libertarian ideas into Catholic thought. Who can forget the Rev. Robert Sirico's [column](#) "Who really was John Galt, anyway?" which sought to make Rand's hero into a Christlike figure? It was appalling.



The One Franklin Square Building, home of The Washington Post, in downtown Washington is shown, Feb. 8, 2019. (AP File Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Responding to Sirico, either in [print](#) or in [debate](#) was made easier by Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical [\*Caritas in Veritate\*](#) which stated:

The conviction that man is self-sufficient and can successfully eliminate the evil present in history by his own action alone has led him to confuse happiness and salvation with immanent forms of material prosperity and social action. Then, the conviction that the economy must be autonomous, that it must be shielded from "influences" of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way. (#34)

The libertarianism of the right, then, is as incompatible with Catholicism as is the libertarianism of the left. Just as Bezos cannot admit to any moral parameters interfering with his business decisions, libertarians of the left, especially in arguments about abortion, deny the existence of moral claims on the autonomous self as well. Catholicism knows that freedom must always be related to truth, especially the truth about the human person.

Some of the best opinion columnists at the Post over the years, people such as E.J. Dionne and Melinda Henneberger, are Roman Catholic. The late great Michael Gerson was not a Catholic but his ideas were often Catholic-adjacent. All three questioned the autonomy of the market and, after the 2008 economic meltdown, you didn't have to be a Catholic to question the sanity of free market ideology.

Bezos, like Elon Musk, may be brilliant in one area of life and a moron in other areas. Both men are dangerous to American democracy because they subscribe to libertarian ideas that seek to crown their economic success with moral authority, as if their becoming masters of the universe was ordained by the gods. In reality, they put one in mind of the fictional Julia Flyte's description of her husband, Rex Mottram, in *Brideshead Revisited*: "I thought he was a sort of primitive savage, but he was something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce. A tiny bit of a man pretending he was the whole."