



When the Giving Gets Rough

by Jonathan Aitken

DONOR FATIGUE, NOT TO SAY COLLAPSE, is fast becoming a major problem for many nonprofit organizations. Due to the crisis on Wall Street and the recession on Main Street, giving to good causes is in precipitous decline. As the year end approaches, fear looms large in many nonprofits' finance departments. I know this because I am directly or indirectly associated with nine of them, all doing admirable work in the field of Christian ministry and charity. Of these, the two least affected are experiencing a 25 percent drop in their donor income, the two worst hit may have to close down, and the rest are struggling. However, there are occasional exceptions to this downward spiral. These tend to come from family foundations whose principals, for one reason or another, have decided not merely to weather the storm but to chart new courses of increased giving.

One such counter-cyclical nonprofit is the McDonald Agape Foundation (MAF), which is expanding its support for Christian scholars, professorial chairs, and education programs in leading universities such as Harvard, Yale, Duke, and Emory. This fall MAF opened its latest benefaction at Oxford: the McDonald Center for Theology, Ethics and Public Life. I predict it will make a groundbreaking impact far beyond the dreaming spires of my alma mater.

The founder and major benefactor of MAF is Alonzo L. McDonald.



At various stages of his 80-year life he has been CEO of McKinsey worldwide, White House staff director in President Carter's administration, and United States ambassador heading the Tokyo round of multilateral trade negotiations during the 1970s. But these days his passion is what he calls "leaving a small footprint for Christ in influential places of learning by supporting teachers who attain both the highest levels of scholarship and represent models of spiritual knowledge and faith."

Such a purpose might sound like piling Ossa upon Pelion in the University of Oxford, where cloisters have been crowded with Christian scholars striving to leave their footprints on the sands of theology and religion ever since the 14th century. But the McDonald Center will be different, because of three 21st-century ingredients: timing, purpose, and method.

For at least half a century a dominant assumption throughout Western Europe and in large parts of America has postulated that the influence of religion is on the wane. Matthew Arnold's gloomy assessment of "the melancholy long withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith has looked all too prescient. As modern life became more rational, more scientific, more permissive, more technological, and more secular, the concomitant decline in religion seemed inevitable. But this so-called secularization thesis has been shaken by several recent developments. Post 9/11, the fear of Islamist violence has caused many communities to reexamine their own theological foundations and to learn about others. The growth of Christianity in China, Africa, Asia, and other parts of the developing world is a spiritual

surprise. Churchgoing in the United States remains high and exerts considerable influence. Even in pagan Europe there is a grudging acknowledgment that religion can no longer be marginalized and should perhaps be moving up the intellectual agenda. The rising generation of high school students has grasped this point, which is why in Britain more than half of the country's teenagers are now taking religious studies in their General Certificate examinations.

The fact that religious interest, if not religious observance, is coming back into fashion presents opportunities. This is the context in which Oxford University has entered into partnership with Al McDonald to launch his new center. "Our aim is to bring the ethical resources of Christian monotheism to bear on more issues of public importance," says its director, Dr. Nigel Biggar, the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology.

SHIFTING THE DIALECTICAL TERRITORY of Christian ethics and theology out of their academic ghetto and into the public square is a formidable challenge, but Biggar is up to it. He is renowned for his writing as a theologian, philosopher, and public affairs commentator. His output is prolific. In the past academic year alone he has authored two books, written ten articles or chapters for academic journals, delivered eight major addresses and ten cathedral sermons, and engaged in a steady flow of seminars, colloquia, and teaching lectures. Biggar's subjects range from the ethics of Karl Barth to the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. Recurrent themes in his work are an emphasis on the connection between religion and public affairs, the interface between the secular and the sacred, and the contemporary relevance of Christian moral theology.

There is a refreshing lack of defensiveness in this approach. As Biggar put it in his address at the launch of the McDonald Center: "The future of religion doesn't look secure because of the bare sociological fact that its popularity is not declining....our present interest in religion offers not just social problems but social solutions. To some of us religion is not only a threat; it is also a resource." He went on to draw an intriguing distinction between liberal anti-religious secularity and the Augustinian secular space. The latter is polyglot in its inclusiveness and Christian theology contributes to it with resources that include "common responsibility to transcendent truth,

humility, and charity, and with repentance, forgiveness, and eschatological hope."

These ideals are shared by Al McDonald, whose spiritual journey has recently led him out of the confusions of the Episcopal Church and into full communion with Catholicism. But the McDonald worldly journey has been a struggle too. He knew poverty as a child of the Depression in the old South. His first job was as a dollar-an-hour shoe salesman,

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from whence he climbed the ladder of corporate America to its highest rungs. Such a life of peaks and valleys suggests that the McDonald Center will have a practical core to its theology. This realism is reflected in the topics for its future program of lectures and seminars. They include: "Heat or Light? The Responsibility of the Media for the Quality of Public Discussion," "Reforming Prisons: The Ethical Dimension," "The Public Responsibility of Universities," and "Can Christian Ethics Be Both Faithful and Plausible in Secular Society?"

Speaking at the launch event when these titles were unveiled, the head of the Oxford faculty of theology, Dr. Paul Joyce, declared: "We academics need to be taken out of our ivory tower." By contrast, many non-academics on the guest list, which ranged across army generals, No. 10 Downing Street aides, prison governors, prominent head hunters, and BBC journalists, seemed well pleased to be present at the creation of such an inclusive new theological venture. Call it a big tent or even a Big Mac, but the new McDonald Center has surely opened its doors to interesting people at an interesting time. Thank heaven for an American philanthropist whose generosity is expanding in these difficult days for nonprofits. ❁

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