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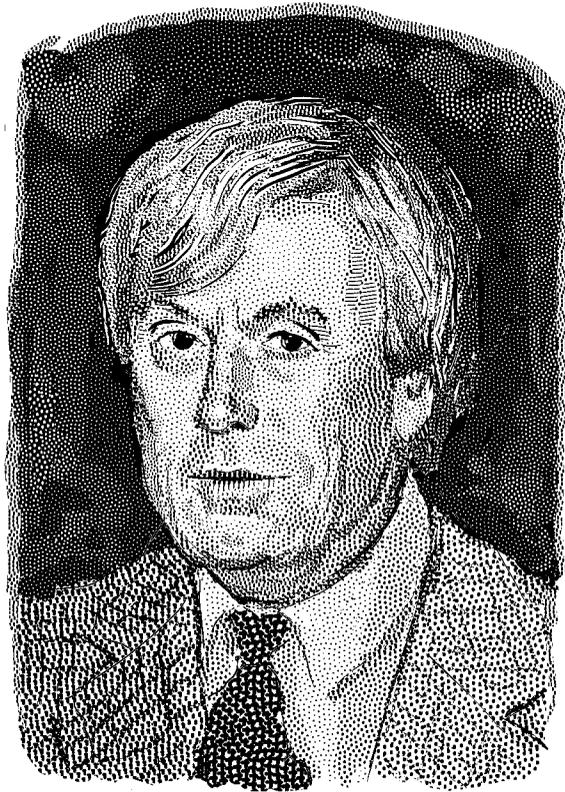
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Essay by Daniel J. Mahoney

## PETER AUGUSTINE LAWLER, 1951–2017



**T**HE SUDDEN DEATH OF PETER AUGUSTINE Lawler on May 23 came as a shock to his friends, family, and acquaintances. At 65, he was a man of long horizons and limitless energy. He had just been named in January the editor of *Modern Age*, the august conservative intellectual quarterly, and his lively first issue—dedicated to conservatism in the age of Trump—suggested that *Modern Age* was on the verge of becoming a truly indispensable journal once again. He continued to edit *Perspectives on Political Science*, a quarterly that eschewed scientism and was truly open to humane reflection on politics, philosophy, religion, literature, and statesmanship. It was one of the few political science journals really worth reading. One couldn't help admiring Peter's intellectual *eros*, public spiritedness, and infectious sense of fun.

He went out of his way to court the best young scholars, graciously giving them a place in his various book collections and publishing enterprises—some with revealing titles such as *Democracy and Its Friendly Critics* (2004) and *Faith, Reason, and Political Life Today* (2001). He had an eye for those who were

pursuing a “dissident” path in an intellectual arena increasingly dominated by an aggressive and illiberal political correctness. All in all, he was the most generous of human beings and a boon companion to those who struggled alongside him to defend political decency and nobility, religion shorn of sentimentality and fideism, and the contemplation of the highest possibilities of the human soul. He was an authentic philosopher, whose originality was rooted in the rediscovery and restatement of old truths.

But he was also an active presence in the public square. Many knew him as a blogger at *No Left Turns*, *First Things*, and *National Review*, commenting in a wry but authoritative way on day-to-day politics, the intersection of faith and political philosophy, and on popular culture (including hit TV shows like *The Sopranos*, *Big Love*, and *Girls*). Peter seemed to see every movie worth seeing (and a few I might have avoided). Some of his best blog posts have been collected in *Allergic to Crazy* (2014), published by St. Augustine's Press, which along with ISI Books and Rowman & Littlefield had the good sense over the years to publish many of Peter's books and edited collections.

**P**OSSESSING WHAT ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN called a principled “point of view,” one that gave him a settled appreciation of the human condition and of the full range of the human virtues, Peter robustly defended the truth as he saw it—without undue spiritedness and in a manner that was always leavened by a sense of humor. In his presentations at professional meetings and at sundry speaking events and conferences (Peter got around), he would laugh at his own jokes in a wonderfully endearing way. He combined fun and high seriousness and, when needed, pug-nacity. He loved his family—his wife Rita, his daughter Cat, his sister-in-law Sarah, and his beloved grandchildren.

Peter graduated in 1973 from Allentown College (later DeSales University), a small Catholic liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, and then received a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Virginia. There he met Delba Winthrop who tutored him in political philosophy and introduced him to the wisdom of Aristotle and Alexis de Tocqueville. He was always grateful to her.

He loved Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia, where he taught for 37 years. He

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loved his country and was therefore a “friendly critic” of democracy’s excesses, ever more apparent in recent years. He loved God and his Church and freely affirmed, as he liked to say, that we human beings were “born to know, to love, and to die.”

ONE NOT UNSYMPATHETIC REVIEWER called Peter the world’s most prominent “thanocentric” political thinker and cultural critic writing today. He took it as a compliment. Of course, Peter had no nihilistic death wish—far from it. He repeatedly affirmed the “indestructibility” of “the good that is human life or liberty.” But against the transhumanists, those who wanted to get rid of death, he saw the free acceptance of our “self-conscious mortality” as nothing less than a gift from God and a mark of spiritual grace and maturity. And against the existentialists, he did not believe that death was the final word or a reason for despair. In doing so, he held on to faith in the promises of God and to Christian hope against every manifestation of nihilism. He believed, reasonably I think, in the “primacy of the Good.” Like one of his heroes, the Southern novelist Walker Percy, he refused to believe that the truth was ultimately sad. As he liked to say, “there is some correspondence between human thought and the way things really are.” His “postmodernism” entailed a return to classical-Christian realism and not some thoughtless radicalization of modernity.

Peter published many books, some structured as monographs, others as collections of essays on common themes. A few stand out. His 1993 book, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty*, is an enduring contribution to Tocquevillian studies. For Peter, the great French statesman and thinker turned to political life and a manly defense of political liberty because politics and liberty were intrinsically good and because they were a welcome “diversion” from the restlessness that drove him. Lawler’s Tocqueville was a principled critic of philosophical materialism and democratic leveling; an eloquent defender of the human soul against pantheism and all efforts to reduce it to something other than itself; and a friend and defender of Catholicism who could not affirm all its dogmatic truths. In *The Restless Mind*, Peter provided the best account of Tocqueville’s *Recollections* I know of, relating Tocqueville’s analysis of democracy to his

own political psychology, one that owed much more to Blaise Pascal (and, to some extent, Aristotle) than to John Locke and the early moderns.

POSTMODERNISM RIGHTLY UNDERSTOOD: *The Return to Realism in American Thought* (1999) also stands out. Here, as elsewhere, Peter took aim at Allan Bloom’s “aristocratic Platonism” which made Socrates too trans-political and too divorced from the moral virtues that are also part of the truth about man. Peter drew out all the moral and philosophical resources of Walker Percy and Christopher Lasch, defending “moral realism” against “therapeutic elitism.” It was in this book that he became forever identified with “postmodern conservatism.” As Peter—and Peter alone—understood it, postmodernism is the “human reflection on the failure of the modern project to eradicate human mystery and misery [Pascal again] and to bring history to an end.” He admired the lesson that the anti-Communist dissidents Solzhenitsyn and Vaclav Havel provided about the noble human effort to resist “human manipulation” of every kind. This noble resistance was rooted in human nature and the great imperative of “living in truth.” Against the illusions of self-creation, Peter followed Solzhenitsyn and Havel in defending “conscientious responsibility.”

*Modern and American Dignity* (2010) assailed those “autonomy freaks” who forgot that persons are “erotic or animated by love.” That book defends the view that we are “relational” persons, not merely autonomous individuals. But Peter went even further. He believed that true science must recognize the personal character of the Logos—of the reason and speech—at the very core of the universe. There is a ground for being a “relational” person in the fact that nature was created by a personal God. Pope Benedict XVI was Peter’s great teacher in exploring the ultimately personal character of what was really real. Like Solzhenitsyn, he criticized the modern world for its excessive materialism and “its replacement of God and virtue with therapeutic techno-comforts and legalism.” A free person is both a being with God-given rights and a relational person “with invincible responsibilities.” And there is no going back to an earlier agrarian stage of the division of labor, as Peter made clear in his final book, *American Heresies and Higher Education* (2016). He never suffered from envy or nostalgia for the alleged

glories of the ancient city-state, medieval feudalism, or a bygone rural America.

IN HIS LAST BOOKS, PETER CONTINUED to develop his thesis that the American Founders “built better than they knew.” He presented a plausible and even compelling defense of the Declaration of Independence as a work of “legislative compromise”—one in which the Calvinists in the Continental Congress amended Jefferson’s Lockean Declaration to make it more theistic and traditional while continuing to defend natural rights and government by consent. The result—a balanced synthesis of Christian and modern wisdom—was “intended by neither the Calvinist nor Lockean parties to the compromise.” By placing a free people “under God,” the founders transcended in decisive respects the natural rights theorizing of the early moderns. The great American Catholics John Courtney Murray and Orestes Brownson were Peter’s inspirations and forerunners in this regard. He never believed that Catholics have to choose between the American experiment in self-government and their faith. “Pure democracy,” with its frontal assault on responsible, conscientious choice and its claim that all choices are equal (a “hellish” thesis in Peter’s view), entails a simultaneous attack on true philosophy, reasonable faith, and a republicanism worthy of the name.

Peter was no friend of the “religion of diversity,” believing that liberal education must still be open to the challenge of truth, including religious truth. Peter found that openness at Berry College and wrote movingly about his small liberal arts college in *American Heresies*.

Peter Lawler was my close friend and collaborator for over 30 years. We saw each other three or four times a year, went to the same conferences, and contributed to the same symposia. We e-mailed and talked on the phone. His was one of the great friendships of my life. A patriot, philosopher, and political scientist who “lived in truth” and brought classical and Christian wisdom to bear on our contemporary discontents, he will be missed by all who loved him. May he rest in peace.

*Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College. His latest book, The Humanitarian Subversion of Christianity: Why the Christian Religion is Not the Religion of Humanity, will appear from St. Augustine’s Press in 2018.*

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