Opinion
Guest Voices



Apple Park headquarters in Cupertino, California (Unsplash/Carles Rabada)



by David E. DeCosse

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The tech bro billionaires for Trump say we are facing a crisis of civilization. Catholicism would like to have a word.

In his widely-noted 2023 "Techno-Optimist Manifesto," the Silicon Valley billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen said: "Our civilization was built on technology. Our civilization is built on technology."

In his 1992 book, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, French philosopher Rémi Brague said: "The civilization of Christian Europe has been constructed by people for whom the end was not at all to construct a 'Christian civilization,' but to make the most of the consequences of their faith in Christ." He added: "Christianity is not interested in itself. It's interested in Christ."

I have been thinking of the gulf between these two perspectives on the source of civilization — the first prioritizing the power of technology, the second the powerlessness of Christ — as tech bro billionaires have put their immense wealth behind the populist nationalism of Donald Trump, and culture-war Catholicism in the United States has gone along for the ride.

Of course, Silicon Valley tech leaders have always been politically active: Many supported Democrats like Barack Obama. But in the last few years, figures including the world's richest man, Elon Musk; PayPal founder Peter Thiel; Andreessen and more have supported the turn to a post-truth Trumpian politics that promises the end of left-wing cancel culture; less regulation of technology; and democracy on the brink.

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Who are these guys — "tech bros" is a sometimes derogatory description of a hypermasculine man working in the tech industry — and what in God's name are they thinking?

The answer can be found by considering two key themes, empathy and power, that reveal the sharp contrast between their vision of technology and the demands of Christian faith.

In interpreting the commentary of these figures, it helps to understand that one story stands at the center of everything: The heroic and contrarian tech entrepreneur who defies the massed naysayers, creates an ingenious product, and deservedly rakes in millions. This modern fairytale conveniently places the tech entrepreneur at the center of their own hero's journey.

On the surface, this story is slick and appealing. But underneath, not so much. One flaw that keeps cropping up is the way that contemporary tech billionaires lionize their victimhood at the hands of so-called communist forces (often, in their eyes, the U.S. government) while lumping actual victims into broad categories of indifference or disdain. In this, they follow in the spirit of one of their favorite authors — the famed libertarian Ayn Rand (Thiel called Rand a "pretty good Christian") — who made the productive virtues of the entrepreneur the height of the moral life and detested the poor and needy as "economic zeroes" and the "scum of the earth."

Recently, Musk revealed this dynamic of claiming victimhood at the expense of actual victims when he said on the Joe Rogan podcast that "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy … the empathy exploit."

Musk's comments occurred amid broader recent criticism of empathy as either unthinking compassion or as a problematic effort to identify with another in a way that diminishes the demands of biblical truth about traditional sexual ethics.

But Musk was moved by something more visceral: the prospect of Western societies being destroyed by admitting poor migrants allegedly unsuitable to assimilation and ready to exploit the empathy that allowed their entry.



Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, gives a keynote address at the Bitcoin Conference April 7, 2022, in Miami Beach, Fla. (AP/Rebecca Blackwell)

Of course, empathy can be exploited: St. Augustine said as much. But, surely, viewed through a Catholic lens, the civilizational challenge is the opposite of what Musk claims: The fact is that today vast tech systems of wealth and power depend for their endurance on the denial of empathy and the creation of enemies. Musk's X social media platform is one of the major offenders.

Moreover, to be made in the divine image means that empathy isn't an ancillary virtue but reflects the empathetic, trinitarian nature of God in whose image all have been made.

For St. Augustine, nothing was more devastating to the endurance of society than what he called the lust for domination or *libido dominandi* ("lust for domination.") In The City of God, he chronicled how this lust can begin in the pride that comes with prosperity; is incubated amid greed and sensuality and ambition; and then is made

manifest by someone who compels the dependence of others as a consequence of that same person proudly rejecting dependence on God.

Augustine's account of the lust for domination captures the dark political energies hidden behind the efficient slickness of the high-level tech bros for Trump.

Musk's DOGE rampage through the federal government in the name of efficiency dripped with contempt for the federal employees he sought to fire. The influential Silicon Valley political theorist Curtis Yarvin, with reckless provocation, says that Washington, D.C., "needs a complete reboot — as complete as the denazification of Germany in 1945, though without the same vengeance." Thiel blithely shucks off political responsibility and says that the "great task for libertarians is to find an escape from politics in all its forms."

St. Augustine

St. Augustine is depicted as bishop of the North African Diocese of Hippo. He lived in the years 354-430 and is considered a church father and doctor of the church. (OSV News file photo)

The same dark energies of the *libido dominandi* popped out when the Heritage Foundation's Catholic president, Kevin Roberts, said in July 2024 of changes he hoped a second Trump administration would make: "We are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be." Last fall Roberts appeared at the Reboot 2024 Conference in San Francisco at an event one tech journalist called "a coming-out party" for the alliance between San Francisco's Peter Thiel-inspired tech bros and the far-right Heritage Foundation." It turns out that Andreessen's understanding of technology as a "violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow down before man" is not so different from the old-time Catholic itch to use state power to compel obedience.

In *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis called out the "technocratic paradigm." By this, he meant the toxic way by which technology, libertarianism and efficiency become an uncontested and inexorable law of power, disruption and progress — no matter the more fundamental claims of justice and love with their ground in the love of God.

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In his massive study of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire, St. Augustine argued that there is no law of history save one: the inescapable drama of choice between the privatizing, domineering forces of self-love and the self-sacrificial love of God. No slick claims about empathy exploits or the need to denazify the federal government or the call to escape politics can hide the tech mogul pretensions at work in that inescapable drama.

In his manifesto, Andreessen says the enemy of our times is represented by Nietzsche's Last Man: The person who refuses risk and responsibility and prizes above all comfort, conformity and security. His solution: Cue the heroic tech entrepreneur who defies such civilization-ending stodginess! But this is all wrong (no room in Andreessee's view for mass conformity to Trump's lies) and represents a worldview that has elevated technology to a singular place at the expense of the fundamental values that bind us together.

Instead we need to recover the heroic action of love that gave rise to our world and points toward a future of hope: pouring water into a basin and washing the feet of our neighbor.