

*First Things'* Article "God and the Internet" written by Jonathan Last

And

My Responses and Blog entries

**FIRST:**

The article by Jonathan Last can be read [here](#), but the section that mentioned me is provided here:

"A more personal strain of consumerism leads people such as Stephen Ray to hawk their wares on the web. Ray, the author of several religious books, runs a website called Defenders of the Catholic Faith. On it he features a photo album of his family and his travels, conversion testimonials from readers, and even his own blog. But the primary mission of Defenders of the Catholic Faith is to move product. Books, audio tapes, videos, DVDs—it's all there, mingled with explanations of "Why I'm Catholic" and lessons about St. Mark. There's also a press kit describing Ray, showing his upcoming speaking schedule, and telling you how to book him at your event for a mere \$600, plus expenses. (That's for local talks; overnight events are \$1,800, plus expenses and, as his site explains, "Steve rarely travels without his wife Janet.")"

**SECOND, MY FIRST BLOG RESPONSE:**

A friend alerted me to an article in *First Things* magazine entitled *God and the Internet* written by an on-line editor for the Weekly Standard named Jonathan Last. I have never heard of him, but that is beside the point. He took a cheap shot at my website. Here is what he said in his section on "consumerism":

"A more personal strain of consumerism leads people such as Stephen Ray to hawk their wares on the web. Ray, the author of several religious books, runs a website called Defenders of the Catholic Faith. On it he features a photo album of his family and his travels, conversion testimonials from readers, and even his own blog. But the primary mission of Defenders of the Catholic Faith is to move product. Books, audio tapes, videos, DVDs—it's all there, mingled with explanations of "Why I'm Catholic" and lessons about St. Mark. There's also a press kit describing Ray, showing his upcoming speaking schedule, and telling you how to book him at your event for a mere \$600, plus expenses. (That's for local talks; overnight events are \$1,800, plus expenses and, as his site explains, "Steve rarely travels without his wife Janet.")"

I decided to write *First Things* to inform them of Last's fallacious and slanderous words. I posted my letter here and sent it to *First Things*. They wrote today and said they would publish my letter in the next issue, but it had to be fresh material -- not already posted

on my website. So, in light of that I HAD removed my response so they can publish it in their next issue of *First Things*.

However, I decided to put my response back up since I am not at all confident they intend to handle this situation properly and to date there has been a lot of correspondence but no apology or promise to rectify the very poor and impugning article by Jonathan Last.

You can write the *First Things* editorial staff by clicking [here](#), and you can visit Mr. Last's web blog by clicking [here](#). He actually has a place where people can leave comments about his article.

**Here is my response:**

“My name is Steve Ray and my website is Defenders of the Catholic Faith. In your December 2005 issue I was mentioned in Jonathan Last's article God on the Internet. While I was flattered to be mentioned, I was not happy with the misrepresentation.

“Jonathan is completely inaccurate about the purpose of my website. He states that the primary purpose of my site is to "hawk my wares" or as he says, "to push product". If Jonathan had done any research for his piece and contacted folks like me, he could have avoided gross inaccuracies and a disservice to your readers.

It is one thing to make an objective statement but quite another to assert a subjective opinion imputing evil or questionable motives -- especially with no proof or verification. How does he know my motives or what the main purpose of my site actually is? He never asked me nor the thousands of people who frequent my site.

“To set the record straight, it costs a lot of money to manage a website the size of mine. Just today I paid my webmaster \$2,000 to install upgrades and to make changes so the site remains viable and easy-to-use. I just paid another \$1,000 for other expenses like the server, the domain name renewals, security upgrades, band width, etc.

“If Jonathan would have asked I would have told him that I make very little money through my website. What little I do make doesn't even cover the cost of running the site. (If he had any experience in such things, or had taken the time to ask, he would have known that.) Every year I lose money -- it costs more to maintain the site than what I actually make from it. I give away almost as much as I sell. My sales all go toward the cost of the web maintenance so that I can keep the website going.

“Let me make it real clear: I am an enthusiastic convert and the main purpose of my site is, and always has been, to help Catholics understand and defend their faith. I had this site LONG before my first book was ever published. I set it up to help defend the faith not to sell stuff.

“My Message Board alone have over 1,000 regular members who are never charged a penny to use the Board. I have spend countless hours and dollars keeping it updated,

fighting off hackers, settling squabbles, paying moderators, and more -- but I have never required or expected any payment from the members.

“Less than 1/25th of my site involves selling the books I've written and the videos I've produced. All of my articles and studies I've uploaded to my site are given away free of charge. And, the only reason I went through the hassle of setting up the store was because people were asking how to buy my books and videos, especially the videos/DVDs which for some reason are not available on Amazon.com. Managing the store is far more hassle than it is worth -- it is a labor of love.

*“By the way, does anyone find it ironic, even hypocritical that First Things “hawks“ products on their website with links to their store on every page? Why no criticism from Mr. Last about that?”*

“In the future it would be nice to make sure your writers do their homework before slandering good folks who are out here trying to serve our Lord. Informing readers that I sell my books and videos is one thing, to misrepresent and impute evil or suspicious motives is quite another thing. Jonathan Last was either dishonest, lazy or taking cheap shots simply to make his point. None of these are respectable or worthy of First Things.

“May I suggest that you provide a retraction and an apology for the statements made by Jonathan Last? It will prove to this reader that your magazine still has backbone and strives for honesty and integrity in what it writes.

In Christ and in His Church,  
Steve Ray

### **THIRD, MY BLOG UPDATE:**

As of this morning, Joseph Bottum, new editor at *First Things*, has ignored my basic question -- *will there be an apology to me and the good folks maligned by his magazine?* I have asked at least three times -- and though we have corresponded back and forth a good number of times -- he has refused to answer or even acknowledge my question. (I hope I don't have to go up the food chain and take additional courses of action.)

Now, maybe he doesn't intend to apologize and doesn't want to admit it, or he doesn't know yet, or he doesn't have the authority to make such a decision, but you'd think he would at least have the integrity to say “let me get back with you on that” or something of the kind.

I was curious about how such an article could slip past the usually vigilant editorial staff. Did the editor fall asleep at the wheel? I did a little research and have a few suspicions. I have a blog ready to post explaining my suspicions but I am giving Joseph Bottum, or whoever does have the authority to make decisions, time to dig out from the pile of letters

criticizing the article. I have to believe that in the end he will have the integrity to rectify this unfortunate situation.

It is much easier and less painful to just deal with things quickly. Ignoring the situation will only cause it to escalate. For all the intellectual prowess some people claim, they sometimes miss the simplest truths. My mom taught me from a baby “Make your life easy Steve, learn to apologize quickly.”

Stay tuned!

## **FOURTH, AFTER INADEQUATE RESPONSES, I LOOKED A BIT DEEPER AND WROTE [THIS](#):**

How Did Such A Shoddy Article Get in *First Things*?



I asked myself, how did an article like this make it into a normally reputable magazine like *First Things*? I had just started reading the article and was disappointed from the beginning. Even before I saw my name mentioned I thought the author was a whiner with little new to say other than to rehash trite old complaints about the internet.

When I reached the middle of the article I noticed my name. I was flattered at first until I saw what it said. It was a misrepresentation maligning me and my work. I was stunned. The article was wrong, not only about me, but about others - some whom I happen to know. Why didn't the

writer do his homework first? Was he short of time? Was he just grabbing for last minute examples to use? Was he “filling the page” trying to meet his quota of required words—even though he really had little to say? Didn't he have time to contact those he was maligning to get his facts straight? I don't know—but I wish I did.

I was all the more puzzled with how such an article made it into *First Things*. Was the editor asleep at the wheel? Was the editor short of time, unable to insure quality and integrity in the articles he approved? I don't know—but I wish I did.

Not only did the author—with the obvious and unfortunate consent of the editor—malign me and my motives, but he boldly claimed to read my mind—stating I had selfish and base purposes for starting a website and what I do for Our Lord. He said the main purpose for my website was to “hawk wares” and to “push products” in his section on “the tyranny of the banal” and the “web's general disposition toward consumerism.” He even had the audacity to include me in those internet “stores and businesses designed to siphon money from the faithful.”

And Jonathan Last (with the approval of the *First Things* editor) didn't just implicate me, he slandered and maligned other good folks as well—folks who have generously given of their time and talents for Jesus Christ ([www.ExceptionalMarriages.com](http://www.ExceptionalMarriages.com) for example). People and websites that have every much a right to sell products on their websites as [The Weekly Standard](#) and [First Things](#) do—and both of them *do* sell products or have stores ready to open soon. (Does anyone smell a bit of hypocrisy here?)

Why did Jonathan Last do it? But even more importantly, *how did he get that article in the magazine?*

**I decided to do a little research today and was a little surprised—though not shocked—at my initial discoveries.** I am not drawing any dogmatic conclusions (like J. Last did in his article) but I did get my curiosity up. My research gave me a sneaking suspicion.

I am giving them a chance to explain—something they failed to grant me and many others mentioned in their article. I will edit my blog based on their response, something they can't do for all those they have vilified in the printed magazine.

### **Here's what I found:**

Jonathan Last is the author of the article in question, [God and the Internet](#). He is *also* the “On-line Editor” for [The Weekly Standard](#). You can see his picture and title in the [bio](#) from *The Weekly Standard* website.



**Jonathan V. Last**  
ONLINE EDITOR

Jonathan V. Last is the online editor at *The Weekly Standard*. He has written for the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Post*, *Salon*, *Slate*, the *Washington Times*, the *New York Press*, and other publications. Mr. Last has appeared on CNN, Sky News, and the Fox News Channel. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

[BACK TO STAFF LIST](#)

And then the interesting thing. I also found out that the editor for *First Things* seems to be relatively new since he was recently the Books & Arts Editor at—you guessed it, *The Weekly Standard*. You can see his recent picture and title on his [bio](#) from *The Weekly Standard*.



**J. Bottum**  
BOOKS & ARTS EDITOR

Joseph Bottum is Books & Arts editor of *The Weekly Standard*. A native of South Dakota, he is a graduate of Georgetown University, with a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston College. His essays, reviews, and poetry have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *First Things*, *Commentary*, *National Review*, *Philosophy & Literature*, and elsewhere. In addition to duties at *The Weekly Standard*, he is poetry editor of *First Things*, and host of *Book Talk*, a nationally syndicated radio program.

[BACK TO STAFF LIST](#)

Was I a little suspicious when I discovered that until very recently Joseph Bottum, the new editor at *First Things*, worked together with, and was a colleague of Jonathan Last, the On-line Editor at *The Weekly Standard*? Maybe a friendship developed as they worked together. Not all co-workers form bonds of friendship, but many do. Maybe this explains how such a weak article made it through an otherwise careful editorial process.

FIRST THINGS is published by **The Institute on Religion and Public Life**, an interreligious, nonpartisan research and education institute whose purpose is to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society.

**Editor-in-Chief:** *Richard John Neuhaus*

**Editor:** *Joseph Bottum*

### **Two things came to my mind.**

First, I wondered if Joseph Bottum had set aside his journalistic integrity and his publisher's caution—for a friend. Maybe Mr. Last got his article published for reasons other than journalistic excellence. Since it was such a shoddy piece filled with cheap shots at good folks, I wondered if someone hadn't turned a blind eye for a friend and close colleague. Then again, maybe the new editor was just young and inexperienced. Maybe he was preoccupied and failed to notice that innocent people would be hurt unjustly. I don't know—but I hope to find out.

Second, it made me wonder if the apologies that are owed would ever be given since friends tend to defend friends against the unknowns, even if they are good folks who have been unjustly besmirched and maligned. Will they have the integrity to apologize and make a retraction? I don't know—but we will all find out.

I may be way off, I don't know. I am open to listen. I am afraid their largest obstacle to an apology and to rectify the situation will be intellectual snobbery, though I hope not. I hope they are good humble men, but I don't know. I hope I can meet them someday.

Thus far the article, the correspondence, the refusal to offer a simple apology, and the interesting relationships between these men have raised cause for questions, at least in my mind. Maybe there is something funny going on in a magazine not known for being funny.

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I will write the magazine a letter demanding an apology -- and if you think an apology is owed to a number of good folks, I suggest you [write](#) the magazine too. If you want to write a letter, you can reach them at Joseph Bottum, First Things, 156 Fifth Ave., Suite 400, New York, NY 10010.

## **FIFTH, JONATHAN LAST RESPONDS TO MY LETTER AFTER *FIRST THINGS* PUBLISHES AN EDITED VERSION OF MY LETTER**

**The whole response is attached to the very end of this report. Immediately below is the portion referring to me.**

### **Jonathan V. Last replies:**

I received an extraordinary response to "God on the Internet," and I would like to thank all who took the time to correspond. Some of it, unfortunately, was generated by Steve Ray's call for the whole Internet to accuse me of making "slanderous statements" about his website. Since slander pertains to the spoken word, I think he meant "libelous," but readers will have to judge for themselves whether Ray's description of his site, or mine, is closer to the mark. On his homepage, he appears dressed in a full Indiana Jones outfit. The first three section categories listed under this logo are "Resources," "Products," and "Online Store." Beneath are links to sales pages for a number of his books. And beneath that is a large advertisement--the first thing the eye sees, really, once it gets past Indiana Ray for Ray's Footprints of God. The ad reads: "Take a Journey of Discovery! Introducing the most original and dynamic video series in Catholic Church history! The Footprints Of God: The Story of Salvation From Abraham To Augustine will take you on a journey of discovery through the sweeping saga of salvation." Click on the link, and you can buy the series for \$249.95.

## **SIXTH, MY FINAL [BLOG RESPONSE](#)**

**When Magazines Continue to Make Mistakes:  
Joseph Bottum & *First Things Magazine*  
Updated 3/5/06 1 PM EST**

[First Things](#) finally published [my letter](#) to the editor along with a few other responses. I had written in response to their [article](#) that misrepresented me and my website. They published my letter -- but *they edited it*. Bottum edited himself out. I am disappointed, though not surprised, that Joseph Bottum (*picture below on right*) "removed himself" from my letter since he has not wanted to be responsible from the beginning. He rather [deferred to his friend](#).

They did a good bit of cutting from my letter. They removed a sentence that would have belied Jonathan Last's (*picture on left*) whole thesis about my website and about me. In my letter I wrote "Last week I sent \$1,000 worth of my books and DVDs to a religious order overseas at no charge." I can understand why they cut that from my letter. It would have shown Last to be mistaken and journalistically irresponsible -- and maybe then he would have been morally compelled to apologize. But in avoiding the truth he and Bottum assume an apology is not needed.

And that's not all they edited out of my letter. By publishing the edited letter they try to take the high road, but in reality it demonstrates that they again took the low road.



And to make fun of the "Indiana Ray" appearance was a bit petty. Actually, had he looked a little closer he would have known the nickname is actually "Jerusalem Jones" which was affectionately pinned on me by another periodical. It was meant to emphasize the adventure flavor of our series which was made for Catholic families. Also, had Last seen me



leading a pilgrimage through Israel last week, he would have noticed that I looked exactly like I do in the picture. I am not a suit and coat kind of guy.

But even sadder, they did not publish other really excellent letters that slammed Jonathan Last's article as petty and sloppy. Bottum chose a few letters that did not hit Last too hard -- softball pitches. I can understand why they didn't publish some of the more hard hitting responses. They published the easy ones so that Last wouldn't look too bad!

Here are a few examples of letters *First Things* received which Bottum was apparently too cowardly to print. For example, read [Al Kresta's letter](#) (CEO of Ave Maria Radio and host of Al Kresta Live on EWTN and Sirius Radio). Bottum also didn't publish [Rosalind Moss'](#) excellent piece probably because it was too hard on his buddy. And everyone already knows about [Karl Keatings e-letter](#) (president of Catholic Answers). These are just a few of the letters I am aware of and I know there are a lot more -- I received at least 25 myself.

Jonathan Last got hit pretty hard for his sloppy piece. I thought these guys -- Bottum and Last -- might be big boys. But instead Last's response shows that he is defensive and touchy and that Bottum deferred to his friend. Last poked at me in his article and was mad at me for poking him back. Because his buddy owns the bully pulpit, it seems that Last gets the last word.

My earlier blog entries on this issue can be read [here](#), and [here](#). One sample letter copied to me can be read [here](#).

**PS.** Oh, and one other factual detail that shows Last is incompetent and doesn't do his homework before he writes. He says "Click on the link and you can buy the series for \$249.95." Unfortunately, it does not say that anywhere on my site because the set is



not yet complete and won't be for another 4 years. What else does he write that has no foundation in fact?

**PPS.** He also made a big deal about the first three items on my Menu Bar: "Resources," "Products," and "Online Store" as though these are all selling products and proving his point. If he would have taken the time to look he would have noticed that "Resources" is actually totally free material I offer to people. Thousands of pages of material and thousands of hours of my work freely offered to help people understand and defend the Bible and their faith. What about it Mr. Last?

## SEVENTH,

These are just two of the many responses I received from people who read *First Things'* response to my letter in their March issue.

These two friends are not anonymous to me, but I refrain from using their names because of their high profile in the Catholic world and since I did not ask permission to quote them.

**1) What a dumb reply *FT* gave your letter---and the others. Still, I suspect in their secret offices, they learned a lesson here . . .**

**2) RE: *First Things*. Good response from you. *First Things* has been my favorite magazine. It bugs me that people who are often so perceptive can at other times be so blatantly blind. It especially bothers me because it would have been so easy to settle the matter.**

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## JOHATHAN LAST'S FULL REPLY in March 2006 *First Things*

### Jonathan V. Last replies:

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I wish Gregory Popcak, for his part, had read my piece more closely. I do not anywhere claim his ministry caters to alternative living arrangements. I merely suggest that his website offers so many products for sale—I count six books, three sets of audio cassettes, and an invitation to an "initial, free, informational interview"—that they could certainly heal any troubled relationship, traditional or alternative.

The editor of *Beliefnet*, Steven Waldman, has several complaints, but his running theme is that *Beliefnet* specifically, and the Internet generally, is a thoroughly pluralistic enterprise. "Pluralistic" is probably a better word to describe *Beliefnet* than "ecumenical," the word I used, but I should point out to Waldman that not everyone on his staff got the memo: When *Beliefnet* first approached me to write for them, the editor I dealt with pitched it to me as "an ecumenical webzine." Waldman takes pride in the fact that his site offers customers maximal consumer choice, and that this is to be greeted with, as John Paul II put it, "confidence." But another word John Paul used is "realism." It seems to me that the Internet shows no end of triumphalism—confidence on stilts but a dearth of realism. That call to realism compels one to note that the marketplace of ideas, like the marketplace of commodities, can have a cheapening effect on what it offers. There are real trade-offs here, and for those of us who believe in the treasures of the faith, this is of real concern.

Matthew Lickona and Jeff Geerling both offer the telling critique that the Internet is neither good nor bad, just new. It is a medium through which human virtue and human vice will flow, just as they do through the pages of opinion journals of opinion or, for that matter, brick-and-mortar churches. And they are obviously right: Technology does not possess the capacity for moral action.

And yet, it still matters how technology affects flesh-and-blood humans, who do have that capacity. On this count, the reaction to my essay increased, rather than allayed, my fears about the Internet. In scores of responses, not one person offered a constructive case for the Internet as a good. Lots of people wrote defensively and angrily about their corner of it. One correspondent, heeding Mr. Ray's call to action against me on his blog, wrote my editors at the *Weekly Standard* suggesting that I be fired because of my "heavy antiCatholicism." Many others voiced similarly reductivist sentiments.

No one so far has put forth an argument for the Internet as a genuine good, the rough outlines of which might be: *"Yes, it certainly looks like consumerism, but the beauty of the web is that it serves a higher purpose and this "product" we're pushing is doing good. Last is missing the boat on a wonderful tool for the furthering God's will because he's blinded by fear—though John Paul II, a promoter of this new technology, constantly reminded us: "Be not afraid."* Experience suggests this optimistic view is wrong, but, as ever, the last word must belong to hope.

