

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FZ-271344)

Public Scholar Program

PROJECT DIRECTOR

Dr. Christopher Michael Bellitto

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Status: Senior scholar
Field of expertise: Medieval History

INSTITUTION

Kean University
Union, NJ 07083-0411

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Humility: A History of a Lost Virtue*

Grant period: From 2021-06-01 to 2021-12-31

Project field(s): Intellectual History; Ethics

Description of project: My goal is to write an accessible history of humility to get a wide conversation going about how to recover a healthy sense of this virtue for our divided society. Research for this interdisciplinary project is complete due to two internal release-time grants at my institution. Primary and secondary texts included humility in ancient world literature; Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures and sermons; eastern and western ethics and philosophy; mythology and theatre (Greeks through medieval morality plays); and Enlightenment and contemporary discussions on education in virtue and citizenship. I tracked how the virtue of humility came to be denigrated as the vice of humiliation. That misconception has often led to the dangers of hybris, arrogance, and narcissism, especially among decision makers in civic society, which dovetails with the NEH initiative, "A More Perfect Union." Exploring the history of humility just might prove to be our path back to civility in public discourse.

REFERENCE LETTERS

Rita George-Tvrtkovic
Associate Professor
History, Philosophy, Theology
Benedictine University
RGeorge-Tvrtkovic@ben.edu

Cary Nederman
Professor
Political Science
Texas A&M University
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NEH Public Scholar Award: February 2020

Applicant: Christopher M. Bellitto, Ph.D.
www.kean.edu/~cbellitt

Narrative: “Humility: A History of a Lost Virtue”

Significance and contribution

My project is a book-length history of humility for a popular audience—in essence, a biography of a lost virtue. I hope to recover the lost virtue of humility not as an academic exercise of historical retrieval, but to offer humility as a way forward for our divided civic society. Humility might serve as an alternative to the diseases of hubris, arrogance, and narcissism that have infected us. We live in a world of “I’m right and you’re bad—so you have no right to your opinion or a place at the table.” This is the self-absorbed product of reckless partisanship, not a well-informed sense of shared citizenship. It is also a very bad management principle. Rigid dualism does precisely nothing to move us forward via dialogue, compromise, and consensus—which, admittedly, is not as enticing and exciting since that way of proceeding thrives in the grey area. Yet slogging through the grey has proven itself time and again to be far less divisive and indeed far more successful than a cartoon-like black-and-white opposition that may make us feel vindicated but gets us precisely nowhere. The frightening alternative to a life of humility has been the death of civility. History demonstrates that when the virtue of humility is cast aside, hubris follows.

I am aware that talking about humility is dangerous. As Benjamin Franklin quipped in his 1791 *Autobiography*, “For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome [pride], I would probably be proud of my humility.” I think studying humility is worth the risk. Dante called humility the first virtue. And yet, one thing that never seems to change in human nature is the vice of what ancient Greeks called hubris: excessive, presumptuous, self-delusional arrogance that inevitably leads to downfall. Shakespeare’s prototypical tragic flaw—a vice—is often the flip-side of a virtue: Macbeth’s ambition becomes lust for ultimate power. The lack of humility—a lack that finds its self-generated power in the idea that I have a monopoly on truth and what’s good for everyone else—leads to self-righteousness, a deceptive sense of certitude, and at worst the denial of basic human rights, respect, and dignity to anyone a person identifies as the enemy. Jacob Burckhardt, the 19th-century Swiss cultural historian, could have been speaking of any age from antiquity to today’s tweeting teenagers when he wrote, “For each man regards all times as fulfilled in his own, and cannot see his own as one of many passing waves. Just as if the world and its history had existed merely for our sakes.”

What I have discovered through the research of my project is that there are two strands of humility in the ancient world that set the table for future explorations of the concept. One strand comes from Greco-Roman culture. It is here that humility gets its bad name, grounded as it is in raw deference and obedience. A person is on the lower rungs of society: a slave is humble because he is “less than” the predominant Roman imperial authorities, so we move to humiliation. Mortals are crushed by gods because they are smaller than divinities—which is not humility but mythological bullying. It is this concept of humility not as virtue but as humiliation that the Enlightenment inherited as it embraced neo-classicism. At the same time, an important exception to this Greco-

Roman sense of humility as humiliation comes from Socrates and was developed by his intellectual heirs Plato and Aristotle—but not always embraced in later generations. Aristotle placed virtue as the mean between two extremes or vices: in this case, humility is a virtue between *hybris* (thinking too highly of yourself) and humiliation (thinking too little of yourself.). For these three ancient Greeks, true learning and self-knowledge begin in the humble acknowledgement that a person must start with what she or he does not know. This sense develops into the medieval notion of learned ignorance. Such a stance developed over time into a positive sense of the common good—that is, humility as healthy self-effacement in the service of others.

A second strand concerning humility comes from monotheistic traditions, where humility is often wrongly translated as fear—or, rather, the misconception that the Abrahamic sense of humility is the same as a modern concept of fear. What the Hebrew concept of fear really implies is a healthy sense of one’s smallness versus the grandeur of a divinity’s bigness—so Moses removes his shoes on sacred ground before the burning bush because he is being humble (*zenua*) or meek (*anav*) in a good way. This sense also connotes awe and appreciation for a power higher than one’s own, which is a measure not of a person’s flaws but rather a self-understanding of one’s place in a larger universe. Self-understanding need not be self-deprecation. When Jesus declares blessed are the meek, he means not the wimps but the lower ones in a hierarchy who, through the circumstance of humble birth and no fault of their own, fall on the bottom rungs of society and class. There is, in Hebrew and early Christian senses, a dignity to humility. In Islam, humility is expressed positively as meekness within the context of submission and patience (*sabr*). We find in *Jami’ al-Ulum al-Hikam* (a 9th c. *hadith* collection), this definition: “Humility is that you accept the truth from anyone who brings it, even if they are young. Whoever accepts the truth from whoever brings it to him, whether they are young or old, whether he loves them or not, then he is humble.” This attitude dovetails with Benedict of Nursia’s sixth-century advice for nuns and monks that the wisest in a community might not be the eldest, so the community should listen to the young who might have more *gravitas* in their insights. Let me stress, however, that I am not advocating adherence to any religious faith tradition, but merely examining religious ethics as an historical development. One can be humble outside of a religious foundation, to be sure. I address humility as an historian rather than a religious partisan. As an example of how I have treated similar material in the past, I have included in this application a chapter from my book, *Ageless Wisdom: Lifetime Lessons from the Bible*. I offer that as an example of how I integrated the history of religion into broader cultural and historical contexts.

This project contributes to scholarship on the history of virtues by taking it in an interdisciplinary direction when it comes to humility. Examples of virtue scholarship include Eric Felten, *Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue* (Simon and Schuster, 2012); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (Norton, 2010); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame, 2007); and a bit further ago, Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity and Civility* (Basic Books, 1996, 1998). I identify two issues related to current study. First, recent studies on the whole do not examine deeply enough—often omitting entirely—religious aspects of virtue over place and time, likely because religion as an historical force can make people nervous. Second, too often their goal is not to take an objective look at developments in

the concept and practice of humility, but rather to make a presentist (frequently ahistorical), polemical and political argument. One example of selectively using the idea of humility without almost any historical context to present a manual of managerial and leadership guru-talk for the contemporary world is John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership* (Zondervan, 2011). While my project asks some of the same questions and takes a similar research approach as Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014), it will be written in a more accessible manner to reach a broader audience. I am looking with my book to place solid scholarship at the service of a wider readership to spur a larger conversation.

What emerges from a humble stance is a discerning mind—or, as a late medieval Parisian scholar put it: discretion is the daughter of humility. This lost virtue provides a sense of perspective and proportion. Being humble makes us ask, “Where do I/my stance/my country/my field/my values fit into a broader society?” That humble stance, to be healthy, must be grounded in dialogue instead of trapped in a self-affirming monologue with oneself or with those who are already thinking like me. Humility works against badgering others into accepting our points of view. Humility can fight versus willfulness because it begins with the chance that we might be wrong. Embracing humility might help make us a more perfect union.

Work plan: writing a book manuscript

The goal of this award is to spend seven months (June 2021 half-time and then July – December 2021 full-time) on concentrated writing and editing so that, at the end of the period, a manuscript is ready to submit to publishers for peer review. Research for this project has been completed thanks to a pair of internal release-time grants at my home institution, Kean University, which provided a reduction in teaching loads. Primary and secondary research materials included treatments of humility in ancient epics of world literature and especially Greco-Roman theatre; Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures and sermons; and Enlightenment and contemporary discussions on education in virtue and citizenship. The book’s plan follows:

- Ch.1 The Problem and the Potential: a virtue that has become a vice
 - the psychology of humility
 - recovering a positive sense of humility to improve civic discourse
- Chs. 2-4 The History: each chapter will look at one period: ancient (ch. 2), medieval (ch. 3), and modern (ch. 4), noting what is shared and what develops/differs in each period
 - Texts explored chronologically include a close look at foundational Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic vocabulary; Eastern and Western ethics, theology and spirituality; mythology and theatre (Greeks to medieval morality plays); the contemporary discussion of virtue; and political and social implications
- Ch. 5 Takeaways: rediscovering an ancient virtue for the modern world—regardless of the reader’s politics or value system
 - self-awareness leads to self-reflection
 - humility produces discretion, perspective, and proportion
 - a meta-attitude, a foundational disposition
 - implications for citizenship: need for more information and dialogue

Competencies, skills, access

I see myself as a public historian working to make the humanities matter. For my entire career, I have worked with media outlets and am often interviewed for documentaries and news stories. I also regularly write essays and articles for broad audiences, such as CNN.com, Reuters, NJ.com, and Philly.com *et al.* My books, including those written for a wide market, have sold about 50,000 copies. I give 25-30 public lectures per year, some of which are arranged through my work on the New Jersey Council for the Humanities Public Scholar Project, where I have been on the speakers' bureau since 2012. I won an NEH Enduring Questions Pilot Course Grant, 2010-2012, which in addition to its course goal of designing a new class resulted in public programming that drew more than 600 students and members of the local community. Most recently, I was a Fulbright Specialist in New Zealand (summer 2019), where in addition to my academic tasks I offered a half dozen public lectures in four cities.

As a public historian of ideas whose work intersects with politics, philosophy, and religion, I have taken an interdisciplinary approach to my research throughout my career. I try to raise the level of discussion through my research, writing, extensive public lectures, and media outreach. I hope to contribute to the recovery of this lost virtue by synthesizing its history for a broad audience in the same way that I have been doing for nearly three decades. As with my prior study of Biblical wisdom (published 2016), my goal here is to share scholarship with as wide an audience as possible by writing a book and then sharing parts of it via Op-Ed essays, popular articles, and public lectures in community settings such as libraries, radio programs, and senior citizen centers. In this case, I want to suggest ways to recover humility's lessons and apply them to civil discourse today as the book's take-away. As an example, research for my book on biblical wisdom resulted in seven popular articles. Among them was an Op-Ed for *The Washington Post's* "Made by History" feature, titled "Why Americans must rise to the challenge of an aging population." When word came that federal and local budgets might harm social services such as Meals on Wheels that especially aid homebound senior citizens, I wrote an Op-Ed for a regional New Jersey newspaper, *The Record*, using the ancient Spartans' care for their elders as an historical lesson for this current event.

Final product and dissemination

My aim is not to produce a study that five people will read, but to write a book that will get a wide conversation going among a broad public readership. Throughout my career, I have tried to make the humanities matter, which played a large role in the workshops I offered as part of my recent Fulbright Specialist project at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, July-August 2019. There, among other tasks, I offered professional development workshops on working with the media, writing outreach articles such as Op-Eds, and designing public lectures. I have done the same work for graduate students and early career scholars with the Hispanic Theological Initiative funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.

I will follow the pattern of prior projects once this history of humility as a lost virtue is complete. With a manuscript in hand, hopefully at the end of the grant period (if awarded), I can move toward publishing houses. During and after that process, I will also seek connections to current events to write Op-Eds and articles in popular magazine as well as to offer public lectures in libraries, community centers, and other settings beyond the campus.

NEH Public Scholar Application: Feb. 2020:

Title: “Humility: A History of a Lost Virtue” :

Christopher M. Bellitto, Ph.D.

A Very Select Bibliography

Primary Sources

Abelard, *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*

Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Dante, *Paradiso*

Hildegard von Bingen, *Play of the Virtues*

Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*

Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*

Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

Plato, *The Republic*

Plutarch, *Moralia*

Seneca, *Letters*

Secondary Sources

Abu Sway, Mustafa. “Islamic Theological Perspectives on Intellectual Humility and the Conditioning of Interfaith Dialogue.” In *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, eds. James L. Heft and Omid Safi, 225-37. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Anderson, C. Colt. “Recovering the Apologetics of Humility.” *New Theology Review* 23 (2010): 25-33

Bejczy, István. *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Chittister, Joan. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*. New York: Crossroad, 1992.

Davetian, Benet. *Civility: A Cultural History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Demacopoulos, George A. *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.

Dickson, John P. and Brian S. Rosner. “Humility as a Social Virtue in the Hebrew Bible?” *Vetus Testamentum* 54 (2004): 459-79.

Farley, Margaret A. “Ethics, Ecclesiology, and the Grace of Self-Doubt.” In *A Call to Fidelity*, eds. James J. Walter et al, 55-75. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002.

Foucher, Jane. *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition*. Colleagueville MN: Liturgical Press, 2015.

Fredriksen, Paula. *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012.

Gaillardetz, Richard R. “Vatican II and the Humility of the Church.” In *The Legacy of Vatican II*, eds. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini. New York: Paulist Press, 2015: 87-108.

Glick, Thomas F. “‘My Master, the Jew’: Observations on Interfaith Scholarly Interaction in the Middle Ages.” In *Jews, Muslims, and Christians in and around the Crown of Aragon*, ed. Harvey J. Hames. Leiden: Brill, 2004: 157-82

Green, Ronald. “Jewish Ethics and the Virtue of Humility.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 1 (1973): 53-63.

Grenberg, Jeanine. *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur’anic Principle of Wasatiyyah*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Macqueen, D.J. “Augustine on *Superbia*: The Historical Background and Sources of His Doctrine.” *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 34 (1977): 193-211.

McIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Myers, David G. “The Psychology of Humility.” In *God, Science and Humility: Ten Scientists Consider Humility Theology*, ed. Robert L. Herrmann, 153-75. Radnor PA: Templeton Foundation, 2000

Phillips, Adam and Barbara Taylor. *On Kindness*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009

Rushing, Sara. “What is Confucian Humility?” In *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, eds. Stephen C. Angle and Michael Slote, 173-81. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Van Tongeren, Daryl R., et al. “Humility.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28 (2019): 463-8

CHRISTOPHER M. BELLITTO, Ph.D.

Kean University, Union NJ

Professor of History 2016—present
Associate (2010-2016), Assistant (2004-2010) Professor of History
• Chair (2011-2014), Assistant Chair (2007-2011), History Dept.

University of Canterbury, Christchurch New Zealand: Fulbright Specialist July-August 2019

Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna Italy: Guest lecturer July 2018

New Jersey Council for the Humanities: Speakers Bureau 2012—present

Series Editor in Chief: *Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition* 2010—present

Paulist Press, Mahwah NJ: Academic Editor 2001-2004 on staff; 2004—present “at large”

St. Joseph's Seminary Institute of Religious Studies, Yonkers NY

Assistant Professor of Church History and Associate Dean: 1996-2001 (non-tenure-track position)

Fordham University, Bronx NY

Fellow, Center for Medieval Studies 2003-2004

Teaching Fellow, History Department 1993-1995

Cardinal Spellman High School, Bronx NY: English Teacher 1988-1990

Higher Achievement Program, Chuuk Micronesia: Reading Teacher Summer 1989

Awards, Professional Service

Board of Directors: Cistercian Publications: Elected Member, 2019-2022

National Endowment for the Humanities: Enduring Questions Pilot Course Grant 2010-2012: \$25k: [results](#)

- Two undergraduate seminars plus student-generated website: www.kean.edu/~justwar
- Public events drawing 600+ students: “Hollywood Goes to War” panel; 1.5 day program: “Just War and Lasting Peace” with Michael Walzer, Jill Claster, and Eric Foner: 3/2012
- Student presentations at Kean’s annual Faculty/Student Research Day: 4/2012
- Bellitto: “*Every Subject’s Soul is His Own: Chivalry and the Just War Tradition in the Classroom*,” in *Chivalry: Medieval Contexts and Modern Portrayals*, Kalamazoo MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2021 (submitted)
- Bellitto: “Teaching the Crusades: Religion, Violence, and Mythistory.” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 25 (2018): 159-65
- Bellitto on NEH panel: “Is There Such a Thing as a Just War? Creating Campus Conversations.” American Historical Association, Washington DC, January 2014
- “Teaching Just War: Lessons from an NEH Enduring Questions Pilot Course Grant,” College Theology Society, Iona College, New Rochelle NY, June 2011

New Jersey Council for the Humanities Mini-Grant, Fall 2011: \$1500: [results](#)

- Supported public program at Kean University: “When Did World War II Begin?”

Peer reviewer: NEH Enduring Questions Grant, 2010, Oxford University Press, Ashgate, Harper San Francisco, Taylor & Francis/Routledge, Eerdmans, Houghton Mifflin, Palgrave, Bedford/St. Martin’s, McGraw-Hill, Rowman and Littlefield, *Revista Española de Filosofía Medieval*, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching*, *Theological Studies*, *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme et al*

Books: Author (selection of 10)

Ageless Wisdom: Lifetime Lessons from the Bible. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2016

101 Questions and Answers on Popes and the Papacy. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2008: [Indian edition](#):
Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 2010

Church History 101: A Concise Overview. Liguori MO: Liguori Publications, 2008

The General Councils: A History of the Twenty-One Church Councils from Nicaea to Vatican II. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2002: [Portuguese translation](#): *História dos concílios de Igreja de Niceia ao Vaticano II*, trans. Cláudio Queiroz de Godoy. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2010

Renewing Christianity: A History of Church Reform from Day One to Vatican II. Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2001

Nicolas de Clamanges: Spirituality, Personal Reform and Pastoral Renewal on the Eve of the Reformations. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001

Books: Co-Editor (selection of 6)

With David Zachariah Flanagan. *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal.* Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012

With Louis I. Hamilton. *Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems, and Approaches.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005

With Thomas M. Izbicki. *Reform and Renewal in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.* Leiden: Brill, 2000

Peer-Reviewed Articles (selection of more than 30)

“To Be Martha or Mary during the Great Western Schism.” *Studies in Spirituality* 29 (2019): 71-85

“Language, Leaders, and Locations of Church Reform in the *Libellus ad Leonem Decimum*,” in *Nicholas of Cusa and Times of Transition*, eds. Thomas M. Izbicki et al, 145-58. Leiden: Brill, 2019

“*Ecclesia semper reformanda*: Medieval Ideas and Attempts at Church Reform,” in *Luther: A Christian and his Legacy 1517-2017*, 2 vols., eds. Alberto Melloni, et al. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017: I:75-90; Italian edition: “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*: Idee medievali e tentativi di riforma della Chiesa.” Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017: I:47-60; German edition: “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*: Mittelalterliche Ideen und Versuche von Kirchenreform.” Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017: I:79-94

“Historical Thinking in Revolutionary New Jersey: Ancient and Medieval History at Liberty Hall.” *New Jersey Studies* 2 (2016): 23-49

“Preaching Peace: Sermon Literature from the Council of Constance.” *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 45 (2013): 1-16

“A Plea for Peace: Nicolas de Clamanges and Late Medieval Disorder.” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 33 (2012): 775-94

“*Per viam rationis...per legem vite*: Pierre d’Ailly and the Last of the Fathers.” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 44 (2009): 65-76

“A Christian Humanist’s Mirror to Princes: Nicolas de Clamanges and the Restoration of Justice During the French Civil War.” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 102 (2007): 100-123

“*Il conciliarismo*,” in *Il Cristianesimo Grande Atlante*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo, Giuseppe Ruggieri, and Roberto Rusconi. Vol. 3, *Le Dottrine*, pp. 1092-1101. Turin: UTET, 2006

Papers and Panels (recent selection of more than 50)

Workshops on media interviews and public humanities portfolios. Hispanic Theological Initiative, Princeton Theological Seminary (funded by Henry Luce Foundation), June 2019

Panel organizer, “Proposals, Manuscripts, and Reader Reports: Navigating the Publishing Process.” College Theology Society, Holy Cross College, South Bend IN, June 2019

Organizer, three panels: “Spirituality, Reform, and Humanism in Medieval Universities.” International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo MI, May 2019

“Writing for a Broad Audience” with Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández. Hispanic Theological Initiative, Princeton Theological Seminary (funded by Henry Luce Foundation), August 2018

Panelist, “Medievalists in Media.” International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo MI May 2015

Education

Ph.D. Fordham University 1997 History

- *Nicolas de Clamanges: Personal and Pastoral Renewal in the Late Medieval Church*

M.A. Fordham University 1993 History

B.A. New York University 1987 Journalism, Politics (majors); Classics, Religion (minors)

- *magna cum laude*; Phi Beta Kappa, 1986

Reading knowledge: Latin, French, Italian