



I Am a Political Animal

ISSUE THREE





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Beyond Religious Liberty: Undermining Nature Just When We Most Need It

DAVID S. CRAWFORD

In a [recent critique](#) of the new “Catholic integralist” movement, *The Spectator*’s Damian Thompson observed that the integralists have about as much chance of bringing their vision to bear as Civil War reenactors do of altering the outcome of that war.

My topic is religious liberty, and I would like to discuss some qualms about the way religious liberty is used and conceived today. But Thompson’s sharp rebuke causes me some trepidation because what I have to offer may seem vulnerable to this sort of scorn. While my purpose is primarily diagnostic rather than prescriptive, even diagnoses may gesture at least vaguely to some path, which might appear as impractical in our immediate historical context as changing the outcome of the Civil War by reenactment.

Religious Liberty at a Crossroads

My wild-eyed claim is this: The use of religious liberty as a refuge by social conservatives, left among the ruins of the “culture wars,” signals the arrival of a kind of cognitive dissonance in our civic life. We can see the nature of this confusion when we consider that the conflicts in which religious liberty is now often evoked—battles over sex and the sexes—are *not* fundamentally about “religion,” or more precisely, *they are not about religion as it is conceived in these debates*. Rather, the real conflict is over the nature of human beings and of the sexes, a topic which is profoundly influenced by, but is not simply reducible to, religion. It is first and foremost a debate about the meaning of our common human experiences of the natural things of this world and what we can know about them. It is simultaneously a debate about what is knowable in civic life and therefore also the meaning and role of reason itself in political and legal thought. In fact, the real cultural and social debate—obscured by ubiquitous proxy arguments and only hazily perceived by the combatants themselves—is between clashing metaphysics or anthropologies. This clash has now born its bitterest fruits in the current “trans” debates, in which the very intelligibility of sex and the sexes has been cast into doubt.

I certainly do not mean to imply a genuine division between religion, faith, or revelation and the meaning of sex, human nature, or for that matter anything else in this wide world. Rather, it is American liberalism that separates “religion” from public or legal rationality and therefore treats it as publicly non-rational. Once Christian ideas about human nature and the real existence and distinction between the sexes are tossed into the bin of “religious belief” so understood, they too are treated as deposits of non-rational faith, as though we only know that men and women really do exist because the Good Book has told us so.

One might suppose that marriage’s basic male-female structure would have a particularly strong claim to at least minimal rational legitimacy, given its procreative potential and the importance of both the mother and father to a child. If

such arguments are not at least minimally rational, the question inevitably arises as to the sort of rationality the courts are trading in.

Christians, and especially Catholics, draw on a conception of human nature as preceding and giving rise to individual personal existence. They view persons as organic wholes. They think that nature precedes and gives shape to authentic acts of freedom. This “givenness,” at once theological and philosophical, phenomenological and symbolic, does not make human nature any less rationally grounded. Indeed, it vouchsafes and sustains its rational character. The Christian understanding of the sexes therefore does not dissolve into a purely “religious” doctrine or belief. Just as clearly, the question has never been a merely “private” matter. Only a thoroughly a decadent, consumerist culture could think that childbearing and the secure continuation of society over time should be thought of as a happy externality of individual lifestyle choice.

Yet, Christian anthropology runs up against current political and legal rationality’s imperviousness to rational accounts of the real things of the world. The result is that Christians’ stubborn insistence on the real existence of the sexes must be shoehorned into private religious liberty claims. Adding to the irony, the mediation of competing rights claims, the currency of modern, liberal political and legal rationality, nevertheless implies a submerged if fragmented anthropology, and, indeed, one that in fact promotes a disordered and incoherent understanding of the sexes.

Ominously, the wave of new laws and court decisions presupposing this disordered understanding amount to a legal requirement that we repudiate our fundamental human experiences of nature, indeed that we verbally deny what our eyes and ears tell us is true. In this way, it enforces a dual, and essentially dishonest, form of discourse: an external, public mode of coerced denial of an internal recognition of what stands before us.

My thesis in a nutshell is this: The Christian proposal for public reason is rejected as public because it is a reason founded on real things. In other words, Christian rationality is not rejected because it is Christian, but because it is rational.

The Paradox of Religious Liberty

There is, of course, a bitter irony in all of this. Christians have long struggled with the insinuation, and often direct charge, that their legal arguments concerning sex, the sexes, procreation, and so on, are in fact nothing more than religious doctrine masquerading as political and legal reason, contrary, at least in spirit, to the First Amendment. Now, as the legal and social environment has become increasingly hostile, they find themselves in the odd position of employing religious liberty claims as the most plausible defense against legislative and regulatory impositions of the new sexual paradigm, thus seeming to concede the point.

Take, for example, *Roe v. Wade*’s 1973 declarations that the Court “need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins” and that Texas “may not override the rights of the pregnant woman” by adopting one such theory.^[1] These claims reject even the possibility of arriving, for purposes of law, at a reasoned consideration and judgment about the ontological status of unborn life. But a judgment about this status is, at the end of the day, the one and only basis for an adequate resolution of the social, cultural, and moral issue at stake. In effect, the Court rejected the idea that a rational, philosophical look at the things of our world—such as the unborn child—can form a foundation or principle for legal rationality. It is a rejection of a realist metaphysics, or a metaphysics of nature, as relevant to legal rationality. The case is instead decided exclusively as a contest of competing interests, those of the

mother and her unborn child or those of the mother and the state. The paradox, of course, is that in prohibiting Texas's "theory" of life, and in demurring from its own explicit engagement with the question, the Court nevertheless silently *decides* the question. First, it imposes its own tacit metaphysics rooted in the principles of autonomous choice and separateness, represented in the concept of "viability," as the moment when the state's interest in "potential life" becomes "compelling." More importantly, in claiming not to decide when "life" begins, the Court in fact *did* decide that "life" begins at live birth. Yet, the Court's substantial but dubious metaphysics remains tacit because it presents itself as an empty or substance-less mediation of individual rights.

It is interesting in this connection to consider Justice John Paul Stevens's separate opinion in another important abortion decision, *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* (1989).[2] There Justice Stevens argued, in part by alluding to St. Thomas's "infamous" doctrine of delayed animation, that claims about the personal nature of the unborn can only be theologically grounded and are therefore precluded as legitimate forms of public or legal argument.[3] Stevens's argument has been echoed many times, most recently by Justice Sotomayor in the oral arguments for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, currently before the Supreme Court.[4] Here we have a perfect example of the idea that any substantive claim about *what* an unborn life is must be merely religious in nature and therefore outside legitimate public rationality. Again, the irony lies in the argument's presupposition that a mere mediation of interests does not itself effectively decide the question of what the fetus is, even as the preservation of the "right" silently implants an anthropology founded on separateness and will, rather than relation and nature.

A similar rejection of rational accounts of nature characterized the debate leading up to *Obergefell v. Hodges*'s constitutional redefinition of marriage to include "gay marriage." [5] A pattern emerged in the many court decisions of the period, beginning with Massachusetts's *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health* (2003), of declaring that arguments supporting the challenged state marriage laws failed even the lowest "standard of review," the so-called "rational basis" standard.[6] This most deferential standard is really only a requirement that laws under review possess at least minimal legal rationality. One might suppose that marriage's basic male-female structure would have a particularly strong claim to at least minimal rational legitimacy, given its procreative potential and the importance of both the mother and father to a child. If such arguments are not at least minimally rational, the question inevitably arises as to the sort of rationality the courts are trading in. Yet, these courts treated the question solely as one of competing interests, detached from any serious consideration of the nature of the sexes themselves. The states' arguments were therefore treated as little more than dressed up religious doctrine, both illegitimate as a form of legal or political discourse and hateful as a kind of moral posturing.[7]

Given this general devaluation of the possibility of rational engagement with real things, it is perhaps understandable that the Little Sisters would turn to First Amendment religious liberty rights to defend themselves from the Obama administration's attempt to force them to offer their employees insurance coverage for contraceptives. Yet this invocation created a certain tension, at least from the point of view of Catholic self-understanding. The Catholic Church has never thought that *Humanae Vitae* (1968) announced a specifically *Catholic* discipline. Nor did it ever consider its teaching against contraception as specifically *religious* in nature, particularly if "religious" is understood as essentially non-rational. Nor has the Church ever considered the teaching to be merely "private," without vast social implications. On the contrary, the Church has always understood its teaching against contraception to reflect a truth of natural law, indeed a truth for all human beings precisely as human, *grounded in reason* rather than faith, and serving as an element of a much larger social doctrine. While natural law and the teaching on contraception are profoundly shaped within a theological horizon, they are strictly

speaking philosophical rather than “religious.” Ultimately, the teaching must live or die on this rational, natural law basis.

It is therefore telling that the adjudicative context of the debate, and the nature of legal rationality in our day, meant that the Little Sisters were constrained to call on the legal doctrine of religious liberty to defend their ability to act on their belief, even though doing so tended to undermine the *basis* for that belief.

We have a similar and more important example in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014),^[8] which addressed the question of *abortifacient* contraceptives. Is the question of abortion an essentially religious one? The Green and Hahn families presumably thought so. But on further reflection, is it not rather a question of the ontological status of embryos and of justice toward all persons? Are these not questions for rational reflection and judgment, questions which must be confronted as profoundly important for the political and legal orders, as well as for civil society? But, as we have seen, *Roe* cut off the possibility for such a rational engagement.

To be sure, the treatment of the Little Sisters’ and the Green and Hahn families’ claims as matters of “deep religious conviction” rather than “philosophy” was a precondition of their qualification for First Amendment protection.^[9] My concern, however, is conceptual. It has to do with the longer-term implications of cabining claims about the natural things of the world in the category “religious doctrine.” As we have seen, the effect of conceiving the issue as “religious” is to convert what is at its heart a claim concerning the possibilities of public knowledge about the real things of this world—about the nature of sexual love and unborn human life—into a claim of “sincerity” about a publicly non-rational bit of theological positivism, both distorting the basis for the belief and sacrificing its relevance as a matter of public importance. We have here a perfect affirmation of Chesterton’s prophetic remark that the propositions “two and two make four” or “leaves are green in summer” will one day become matters of religious conviction.^[10]

We find a similar use of religious liberty in the legislative proposal known as “Fairness for All” (FFA). Introduced by Rep. Chris Stewart of Utah in 2021, FFA seeks a compromise between the LGBT movement and religious people by mediating between concerns for equality and religious freedom. While FFA may seem like moderation itself when compared to the far more authoritarian Equality Act, it would at best have the effect of conceding that for purposes of the vast bulk of our social life we will accept the LGBT movement’s fragmented conception of the nature of sexuality. It would concede, in other words, that the whole of society outside a narrow band of religious exemptions should be shaped *as if* that understanding were valid.

It is true that religious liberty litigation has seen some recent successes, albeit mostly in cases decided on narrow or technical grounds.^[11] Indeed, at least some members of the Court have indicated the desire to offer a more expansive reading of the Free Exercise Clause.^[12] But if this more expansive reading offers an obvious strategic and practical advantage, it would also effectively codify the confusion I am highlighting.

It is true that litigants, such as the Little Sisters, the Greens and Hahns, and the bakers, florists, and others caught up in the gender wars, generally explain their beliefs in religious terms. Just as certainly, however, they also think that the real existence of men, women, and unborn children is part of our fundamental human experience, fully intelligible without immediate recourse to religious doctrines or beliefs. Yet, our political, cultural, and intellectual environment conditions litigants and others to think of their belief in the intelligibility of human nature in immediately “religious,” and therefore essentially non-rational, terms.

Religion and Reason

Christians' and others' background belief in creation commits them to recognizing the integral reality and meaningfulness of things in the world, especially of the human body with its division into male and female. Christian revelation, especially as mediated through the Catholic sacramental economy, dramatically deepens how we understand this division of the sexes. Yet, if revelation shows us the otherwise hidden depths of the things of the world, the things of the world also show us the meaning of revelation. If we believe there is an analogy, for example, between marriage and the God-world relationship, particularly as consummated in the Incarnation and the union of Christ and the Church, we must also believe that mundane human marriages share in and reveal the higher reality. The reality and integrity of both analogates are necessary for the analogy to work. Only our experience of fathers of flesh and blood can make God the Father intelligible to us. Only our knowledge of sons can make the eternal Son intelligible to us. Only the experience of mothers can make the Church intelligible. Only the experience of blood relations, of natural brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins, can make ecclesial communion real for us. And it is only because we know all these natural things from the earliest moments of our coming into awareness of ourselves and our world that we can know the higher realities that lay claim to us in the most intimate possible way. But this means that the things of the world, including the sexes, must have their own "autonomous" natural standing in worldly reality.

So, the commitment to the integrity of worldly reality is not simply reducible to the prior belief in creation. The religious atmosphere of our recognition of worldly things does not convert our earliest and most fundamental knowledge of human nature into a kind of positivistic theology. It certainly does not make that knowledge non-rational. It does not turn it into a quaint private belief. If the things of the world are structured as they are because God created them, they are nevertheless really structured that way, and this fact is open for all to see.

These reflections raise a point that has been latent in my discussion up to now. If the idea of "religion" in our understanding of religious liberty were more wholesome, the recourse to religious liberty in the gender wars would be less problematic. But as it is, our political and legal orders, as witnessed in both legislation and court decisions, regard religious belief and practice as lying outside the domain of rationality. Religious liberty claims, therefore, demand respect for beliefs that in effect defy public or legal intelligibility or understanding.^[13]

An objection may have come to mind. Saying that religious rationality cannot be thought of as public rationality is not the same as saying that the category "religion" is "non-rational." It is only to make the more limited claim that religious rationality has been put out of play for public purposes. Hence, it might be countered, nothing has been said one way or the other about religious claims' inherent rationality. This objection misses the point. Reason depends on rational principles, whether we make these explicit or not. The removal of religious reasons from public rationality is, in effect, the removal of religious rational principles from public rationality. But this is just a way of saying that religious reasons do not count as rational principles for public purposes. And this, in turn, means that, from the public point of view, religious rationality is without principle and is therefore non-rational.

While this public non-rationality of religion is itself highly problematic, my purpose here is to point out that under these circumstances recourse to religious liberty claims in the context of sex and the sexes only cements the pernicious concession of the basic non-rationality of beliefs concerning human nature, as though belief in the reality of sex and the sexes is only a matter of private and sincerely held religious conviction.

It is this position of non-rational belief that is improbably pitted against *publicly rational* equality-based

claims, such as the claim to fair and equal access to employment, goods, and services. Hence, an opening is created for declarations such as that of [Pete Buttigieg](#) during his abortive 2020 presidential run: “The right to religious freedom ends where religion is being used as an excuse to harm other people.” If we can no longer advance a publicly rational argument concerning the nature of sex and the sexes, then our position must be, at least publicly, bigoted. As a non-rational check on public rationality’s work, religious liberty’s employment in this area must boil down to the following claim: “Look, I don’t ask you to understand my non-rational belief, but only to respect it because I sincerely hold it. And, by the way, please also disregard its discriminatory implications.”

This tendency toward a positivistic understanding of religion haunts American political and legal discourse. The paradox we face is that legal ordination of the sexes and their role in society is fundamental to civilization itself. Indeed, the possibility for a truly human civilization is at stake in this one issue. Yet, America’s legal and political epistemology is incapable of engaging the topic intelligibly. To do so, we would need first to know what sex and the sexes are. But this question turns on the even more fundamental one of what a human being *is*. And that discussion is not something legal or political discourse is prepared to handle or even consider.

Science and Mysticism

At first sight, this last claim—my leitmotif—may seem patently wrong. Our way of understanding what things are, it would seem, is modern science, and indeed courts and legislators have constant recourse to science in their discussion of gender, life, and other such issues. Regarding our present topic, then, scientific rationality serves as a realist antipode to religious non-rationality.

Yet, science has clouded rather than brought light to the question. This can be seen in the very influential early work of John Money, who in the 1950s coined the word “gender” as applicable to persons, and Robert Stoller, who in the 1960s coined the phrase “gender identity.” Money’s methodological analysis of “sex” into seven components (morphology, gonads, chromosomes, endocrinology, and so forth) plus “gender,” the psycho-social aspect, is a prime example of science’s typically reductive approach.^[14] Crucially, Money claimed that his study of hermaphroditism, for whom the various components do not “align,” provided a way to understand sexuality universally, even where the components *do* align. In other words, the anomalous conditions of his patients were consciously and explicitly used to understand the *nature* of human sexuality as such. Indeed, Robert Stoller referred to his transsexual patients—believe it or not—as “natural experiments,”^[15] as though their non-alignment was a naturally occurring equivalent of laboratory dissection.

This pattern, of fragmenting sexuality into its constitutive parts, trying to understand healthy sexuality through the lens of this fragmentation, and the principled division of sexuality into its mental and bodily aspects, continues today, including for example in expert testimony.^[16] It is common to invoke the variants studied by Money and Stoller in an attempt to show that human sexuality should not be thought of as essentially “binary” or human inclination as naturally directed to the opposite sex.

Even this thumbnail sketch suggests the problematic character of the proposition that science can tell us what sex is. Money’s and Stoller’s categorizations unavoidably involve assumptions and judgments concerning, for example, the relationship between the body and subjectivity (i.e., a variant of the “body-mind problem”), how *elements* of sexuality relate to sexuality *as a whole* (i.e., the problem of parts and wholes), and the question of whether the nature of sexuality can be understood by looking to anomalous instances (i.e., the problem of nominalism and nature). These are not scientific questions but metaphysical ones. Indeed, they are *classic* metaphysical questions. Gender science’s tacit presupposition of their resolution in one direction can hardly be viewed as unproblematic or as either

metaphysically or religiously neutral. The close relationship of these underlying questions to scientific judgments brings into relief the fact that science is not without its metaphysical commitments.[17]

The question “what is sex?” is dissolved rather than answered under a Money’s or a Stoller’s hand. By attempting to make sexuality intelligible through its aberrant instantiations, the resultant science begins with the very assumption—the fragmentary understanding of the human person—that fuels the gender movement.

Gender’s Aporia

What, then, is the proper response to the issues I have raised? It is here that my “prescriptive” gesture may appear to be an exercise in “reenactment.”

Nevertheless, we can at least say that, as a general matter, the nature of something may be found by seeking the core element of its intelligibility. To see natural form, we must ask ourselves: What is that conceptual and ontological element without which the thing in question could not exist or would simply be unintelligible? In relation to sex, that core element is clearly the so-called “binary,” the organic complementarity of the two sexes, man and woman, precisely what is undermined by the concept of “sexual orientation” and ultimately denied by “gender identity.” Without this, there simply is no “sex,” as the rapid devolution of the gender identity movement in the direction of “non-binariness” (and, therefore, also of the erosion of its own basis for being and intelligibility) has shown.

Until we develop a mode of legal discourse that can account for this core element, our civil conceptions of sexuality will grow increasingly incoherent. Sexuality is only intelligible in view of the two sexes, and these are only intelligible in their ordination to each other, along with this ordination’s procreative potential. The concepts of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” both rely on and undermine the intelligibility of this ordination. They render the relationship between personal subjectivity and the sexually dimorphic body arbitrary. In this way, they externalize and materialize the body. Yet, they attempt to build a sense of personal subjectivity that logically relies on this de-personalized body. They are, in other words, parasitic on the natural ordination of the sexes to each other and their relationship to procreation, even as they drain their host of its life-force.[18]

In this way, the dual concepts of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” have rendered modern sexuality internally incoherent, precisely by obliterating the core element of its intelligibility. This rejection of the bases for a rational account of the things of the world, in favor of a mediation of rights and interests, is the direct source of the civilizational crisis presented by modern legal rationality. Again, Christian public rationality is not rejected because it is Christian, but because it is rational.

David S. Crawford is the Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Moral Theology and Family Law at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, and the author of Marriage and the Sequela Christi (Lateran University Press).

[1] 410 U.S. 113, at 160, 162 (1973).

[2] 492 U.S. 501 (1989).

[3] *Ibid.*, at 563ff. See also Ronald Dworkin’s famous and influential article, “Unenumerated Rights: Whether and How Roe Should Be Overruled,” in *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 59 (1992): 381-432, at n. 36. Interestingly, Justice Stevens falsely supposes that Thomas’ doctrine concerning

delayed animation is “theological” in nature, when in fact it is a philosophical doctrine and indeed one inherited from Aristotle. This misapprehension, however, suggests the very tendency I am trying to highlight in this paper.

[4] Oral Argument Transcript (Dec. 1, 2021), Docket No. 19-1392: 29-30.

[5] 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

[6] *Goodridge v. Dep’t. of Pub. Health*, 798 N.E.2d 941, 958-68 (Mass. 2003). See also, for example, *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, 704 F. Supp. 2d 921, 994–1003 (N.D.Cal. 2010). See Katie R. Eyer, “The Canon of Rational Basis Review,” 93 *Notre Dame Law Review* 1317 (2018) for a discussion of the growing use of rational basis review.

[7] E.g., *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, 704 F. Supp. 2d 921 (N.D. Cal. 2010).

[8] 573 U.S. 682 (2014).

[9] *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, at 216 (1972).

[10] G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: John Lane Company, 1905): 304-5.

[11] E.g., *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. ___ (2018); *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, 593 U.S. ___ (2021).

[12] At least six of the justices in *Fulton* expressed skepticism concerning *Employment Div. v. Smith’s* rather stingy treatment of the Free Exercise Clause (494 U.S. 872 [1990]). Moreover, the Court seemed to hint that it would have been favorably disposed toward a religious liberty claim in *Bostock v. Clayton County* 590 U.S. ___ (2020).

[13] E.g., *Thomas v. Review Board*, 450 U.S. 707 (1981): “Religious beliefs *need not be* acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others in order to merit First Amendment protection” (714); *Employment Div. v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990): “Repeatedly and in many different contexts, we have warned that courts must not presume to determine . . . the plausibility of a religious claim” (887).

[14] E.g., John Money, Joan Hampson, and John Hampson, “Examination of Some Basic Sexual Concepts: The Evidence of Human Hermaphroditism,” 97 *Bulletin of the John Hopkins Hospital* 301, 302 (1955); Money, Hampson, and Hampson, “Imprinting and the Establishment of Gender Role,” 77 *A.M.A. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* 333 (1956).

[15] Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (Karnac Books, 1968): vii, 5, 14.

[16] E.g., *Schroer v. Billington*, 525 F. Supp. 2d 58 (D.D.C. 2008) (testimony of Dr. Walter Bockting, of the University of Minnesota and World Professional Association of Transgender Health (“WPATH”)). Sharon M. McGowan, “Working with Clients to Develop Compatible Visions of What It Means to ‘Win’ a Case: Reflections on *Schroer v. Billington*,” 45 *Harv. C.R.-C.L. L. Rev.* 205, 234-5, citing tr. of Bench Trial at 402-03, *Schroer*, 525 F. Supp. 2d 58 (D.D.C. 2005) (No. 05-1090).

[17] This would seem to be the ineluctable conclusion to be drawn from T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962, 4th ed., 2012), however much Kuhn himself might want to qualify it. See Henry Veatch, *Human Rights: Fact or Fancy?* (Louisiana State University

Press, 2007), 236.

[18] For a more complete discussion of this problem, see my “Gender Identity and Nihilism: Some Anthropological Implications of Recent Caselaw,” *SSRN* (October 7, 2019) and “Liberal Androgyny: ‘Gay Marriage’ and the Meaning of Sexuality in Our Time,” *Communio* 33 (Summer 2006).

The Enduring Achievement and Unfinished Work of Robert Nisbet

JEANNE SCHINDLER

A longer version of this essay appeared as an appendix to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's 2010 reprint of The Quest for Community. Material from that essay is used here with permission.

For forty years now, commentators from across the philosophical spectrum have sounded a common alarm: American democracy is in crisis. Observers from Michael Sandel to Robert Putnam to Mary Ann Glendon have voiced a basic concern that our polity is in serious disrepair and that one of its chief ailments is a decline in the institutions of civil society. Though the literature addressing this dimension of “democracy’s discontent,” as Sandel phrases it, has proliferated in recent years, those concerned about the problem would do well to revisit the work of eminent sociologist Robert Nisbet.^[1]

His corpus, spanning five decades, constitutes a treasury of insight into social life that repays close examination today. Nisbet is an extraordinary diagnostician of modern social ills, and the acuity of his diagnosis owes much to his knowledge of history and attention to philosophical conflict. At the same time, the prescriptive dimension of his work remains incomplete, needing a more adequate theory of the state, human freedom, and the normative status of social institutions. Here the social ontology and political vision of Catholic social thought can correct and complete Nisbet’s already impressive achievement.

The Loose Individual in a Twilight Age

In his first book, the widely acclaimed *Quest for Community* (1953), Nisbet identified a strong strand of alienation and cultural unrest amidst the heady affluence, peace, and productivity of postwar America. Below the optimistic surface of the time lay a disturbing change in consciousness.

The culture shapers of the nineteenth century, fervent believers in progress and the power of unassisted reason, had celebrated the independent individual as their ideal. These rationalists held “the essence of society to lie in the solid fact of the discrete individual—autonomous, self-sufficing, and stable—and the essence of history to lie in the progressive emancipation of the individual from the tyrannous and irrational statuses handed down from the past.”^[2] Increasingly free from the shackles of tradition and the binding ties of church, kin, guild, and locality, the hearty soul could fashion for himself a life as unique as talent and ingenuity could make it.

A powerfully centralized economy and omnicompetent state had undermined the authority of the township, family, church, university, and other institutions whose significance rests precisely upon the capacity to perform an indispensable function. Thus stripped of importance, the institutions in question no longer compel participation and allegiance, and the social bonds once forged within them wither.

Alexis de Tocqueville—for Nisbet a social observer of the keenest perception—readily identified this independent, if not rebellious, streak in the American mind. The American disposition, Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, was decidedly antitraditional: “The nearer the people are drawn to the common level of an equal and similar condition, the less prone does each man become to place implicit faith in a certain man or certain class of men.” Neither the clergy nor the professoriate retained automatic authority. Democratic equality, free markets, fluid property, and social mobility would be the hallmarks of the new republic.

While their proponents celebrated these changes as liberating, Tocqueville noticed certain baleful effects. Absent binding ties to place, class, and family name, Americans were becoming an ahistorical people, forgetful of the past, heedless of the future. Noting their preoccupation with the present, Tocqueville soberly observed: “The woof of time is every instant broken [here] and the track of generations effaced. Those who went before are soon forgotten; of those who will come after, no one has any idea: the interest of the man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself.”^[3] Ironically, the very equality that seemed to render the American independent of others and ostensibly free from intellectual authorities increased “his readiness to believe the multitude.”^[4] Without the sturdy roots of an inherited tradition, the lone thinker proved a weak reed, easily swayed by the current of popular opinion.

A century later, Robert Nisbet witnessed these effects in their maturity. It was, he lamented, a grim picture. While the watchwords of the nineteenth century had been *progress, reason, freedom, and change*, the twentieth century’s lexicon featured *alienation, decline, disintegration, and insecurity*. Shorn of his social connections, the rugged individual turned anxious, rootless, and prey to the lure of mass movements promising moral certainty and existential purpose. In fact, Nisbet insisted, the appeal of such ideologies as communism and fascism reflected the emergence of a “twilight age” in the West, an age in which “human loyalties, uprooted from accustomed soil, can be seen tumbling across the landscape with no scheme of larger purpose to fix them.” In this context, “[i]ndividualism reveals itself less as achievement and enterprise than as egoism and mere performance. Retreat from the major to the minor, from the noble to the trivial, the communal to the personal, and from the objective to the subjective is commonplace.”^[5]

The characteristic personality type of a twilight age is the figure Nisbet dubbed “the loose individual,”^[6] the man bound by few constraints or compelling responsibilities, who is alienated from the past, from a sense of place, from meaningful connection to the natural world and its rhythms, and from tangible property. His freedom from the ties of class, religion, and kinship that defined his predecessors is accompanied “not by the sense of creative release but by the sense of disenchantment and alienation.”^[7] His is an existence preoccupied by the self, by the disquiet of his inner consciousness.

As Nisbet surveyed the social scene at mid-century, he found one of its chief characteristics to be a disturbing decline of the institutions of civil society. These are the relationships that “mediate directly between man and his larger world of economic, moral, and political and religious values.”^[8] Traditionally, it is within these groups that man has discovered his sense of self, his moral compass, his status and roles, and a world of symbolism that renders the cosmos intelligible. But by the mid-twentieth century, Nisbet argued, the traditional primary relationships of family, neighborhood, church, trade union, charity, and so forth had lost their functional importance. At one time the household, for instance, had been the site of indispensable economic functions, as the example of the family farm and workshop attests. But this system collapsed under the pressures of industrialization and the centralizing impetus of capitalism. Likewise, Nisbet observed, the neighborhood and town no

longer retained serious political significance, with the center of political gravity in America shifted to the federal government.[9]

Yet, the family, the church, and other primary communities were still *expected* to play important roles in the moral formation and psychological development of their members. As Nisbet recognized, however, once a social institution loses significant functions and a place of status in the larger culture, its capacity to exert authority and evoke allegiance of any kind diminishes. Such institutions “must *seem* important” in the broader social order, “but to seem important they must *be* important.”[10]

Nisbet’s reflections on the state of the family are especially relevant today. “The family,” he wrote, “is a major problem in our culture simply because we are attempting to make it perform psychological and symbolic functions within a structure that has become fragile and an institutional importance that is almost totally unrelated to the economic and political realities of our society.”[11] In the modern economy, the family has little productive value and virtually no relevance for the formal category of citizenship and political participation; by and large, it is the individual who is the focal point of law, education, and culture.

Nisbet was not sanguine about the prospects for traditional social institutions. “State and economy alike,” he averred, “have, in effect, bypassed family and community to go straight to the individual, thus leaving him so often precariously exposed to the chilling currents of anonymity and isolation.”[12] A powerfully centralized economy and omniscient state had undermined the authority of the township, family, church, university, and other institutions whose significance rests precisely upon the capacity to perform an indispensable function. Thus stripped of importance, the institutions in question no longer compel participation and allegiance, and the social bonds once forged within them wither. A robust civil society gives way to a sea of disconnected individuals.

Nor did he see new associations emerging that could fulfill both the functional and psychological tasks once accomplished by these groups—hence the unsatisfied thirst for communal belonging that struck him as widespread and dangerous.

The acuity and prescience of Nisbet’s observations are remarkable, anticipating by several decades the disturbing findings of social observers like E. J. Dionne, who surveyed political disaffection in *Why Americans Hate Politics*, and Robert Putnam, who catalogued the collapse of communal organizations in *Bowling Alone*. Nisbet foresaw an impending social crisis because he perceived widespread alienation from the social order.

For a constantly enlarging number of persons, including, significantly, young persons of high school and college age, this state of alienation has become profoundly influential in both behavior and thought. Not all the manufactured symbols of togetherness, the ever-ready programs of human relations, patio festivals in suburbia, and our quadrennial crusades for presidential candidates hide the fact that for millions of persons such institutions as state, political party, business, church, labor union, and even family have become remote and increasingly difficult to give any part of one’s self to.[13]

The New Laissez Faire

To reverse the trends of state power, social fragmentation, and individualism will require nothing less than a “revolution in ideas,” Nisbet insists. In *The Quest for Community* he proposes just such an alternative, “a new *laissez faire*.”[14] Unlike its namesake from classical liberalism, the new *laissez faire* would privilege the freedom of civil society, not merely the individual. Nisbet argues that a “unitary theory of democracy,” according to which the individual and the state are the central political actors,

must be rejected; instead, democracy must foster the functional autonomy of groups and institutions.

In the concluding chapter of *The Twilight of Authority* (1975), Nisbet expands on this argument, sketching the central elements of the social pluralism he thinks essential for cultural renewal. The first of these is *functional autonomy*, according to which each significant social institution—from the family to the school to religious bodies to the economy—should enjoy maximum freedom in realizing its own proper ends, thus promoting a rich harmony of social voices rather than the dull monotone of state-imposed uniformity. Functional autonomy requires *decentralization*—that is, a revival of American federalism—as a close corollary, since the centralization of power enervates the wider social order. But a decentralization of political power is not enough; the scope of “the political” itself must shrink, to counter the state’s appropriation of once-social functions.[15]

Hierarchy and *tradition* are likewise indispensable elements of social pluralism. Against the equalitarian imperative, Nisbet argues that an appreciation of what is high, exceptional, distinctive, and rare is essential to a civilized culture. Similarly, in a time of stifling legalism and litigiousness, he proposes a return to social life governed as much as possible by informal customs and traditions of interaction so as to promote freedom and social vitality.

Nisbet’s Unfinished Work

From *The Quest for Community* to *The Present Age*, Nisbet’s chronicle of the decline of the social order, the rise of the military Leviathan, and the consequent widespread experience of alienation is illuminating and persuasive. It reflects a capacious intelligence capable of synthesizing material from a host of disciplines and sources. Nisbet’s powers of description are extraordinary. The prescriptive elements in his work are also compelling, but they require fuller development and a more satisfying foundation. To achieve social pluralism requires moving beyond historical description and sociological analysis to social ontology—that is, to philosophical and theological anthropology. The vision of man, society, and politics found in Catholic social thought provides the resources needed to establish the pluralism Nisbet desires.

From the perspective of Catholic social thought, one of the cardinal strengths of Nisbet’s approach is its resolute rejection of reductionism on the one hand and determinism on the other. In his magisterial introduction to the study of sociology *The Social Bond*, Nisbet warns against “the reductionist fallacy” of explaining higher levels of reality by exclusive appeal to the operation of lower levels.[16] Moreover, he insists that social life has a substantial reality that cannot be reduced to the behavior of individuals: “We do not really see ‘individuals’ in the sense of discrete, elemental human particles in the world around us.” Rather, we see “human beings only in the roles, statuses, and modes of social interaction which are the stuff of human society. And these roles, statuses, and modes of interaction are *social*—that is, they belong to an order of reality that is every bit as solid and differentiable as are the atoms dealt with by physicists, the molecules and substances by chemists, and the tissues and organs by biologists.”[17]

True to his principles, Nisbet examines the highest reaches of human experience, including man’s experience and symbolization of the sacred. Unlike some of his determinist colleagues who would view religion as mere epiphenomenon, Nisbet views the sacred as “the historical and continuing core of culture.”[18] Our religious symbols and norms testify to human freedom; we are more than atomic clusters, we are more than the sum of material processes of any kind—biological, physiological, or economic.

Still, Nisbet is reluctant to address the question of religious truth per se. This is a significant lacuna in his work, because he himself acknowledges that ideas matter and does not hesitate to offer stringent

normative judgments on a range of disputed questions. “Everything vital in history reduces itself ultimately to ideas, which are the motive forces.”^[19] If this is true, then our ideas about God and the nature and destiny of man must matter especially. But if *this* is true, then it will not suffice to appeal to the importance of “the sacred” or “traditions” or “customs” generically understood. For as both history and contemporary experience attest, conceptions of the sacred and the ways of life to which they give rise differ dramatically, and not all will sustain the vision of a free social order that Nisbet proposes.

Here is where a Catholic anthropology is especially pertinent. To protect human freedom from a degrading determinism or the predations of political power, one must demonstrate that there is something sacred and inviolable about each human being. Christianity has a singular capacity to do this, for it affirms the transcendent origin and destiny of every person. As Pope John Paul II expressed it in *Evangelium Vitae*, “Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase.”

The dignity of the individual affirmed here does not imply the individualism Nisbet fears. To the contrary, created in the image of a Trinitarian God, man is intrinsically social, precisely designed for community. It is only in and through community that man realizes his fundamental vocation to love. As the Second Vatican Council put it in *Gaudium et spes*, God “willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” This fraternal spirit is expressed first in the intimate life of the family and moves to “intermediate communities” that give rise to “specific networks of solidarity,” within which the human person develops his gifts morally, intellectually, and spiritually.^[20]

This description dovetails with Nisbet’s celebration of intermediate groups, voluntary associations, and the like. But an important difference emerges in *The Quest for Community*. In the Preface to the 1970 edition, Nisbet strenuously objects to the idea that he is nostalgic for an earlier way of life or old forms of community. “Only the archaist,” he insists, “would say that these specific bonds are necessary”—hence Nisbet’s plea for new groups and associations independent from, and as a curb upon, the overweening modern state. The problem with this formulation is that it does not recognize the possibility that some social institutions both perform an essential function and do not admit of significant alteration.

Catholic social thought, by contrast, recognizes that not only do human beings enjoy a nature with distinctive ends and prerogatives, but that social institutions do too. As Russell Hittinger has argued, the Church understands that social institutions, like marriage, the family, the church, and the state, are vested with authority to carry out an irreplaceable mission.^[21] And in the case of certain of these, such as marriage and the church, the precise form of the institution is indispensable: the family, rooted in heterosexual, monogamous marriage, and a hierarchical church are designed by God with a structure uniquely suited to their purposes.

Nisbet might resist this contention, for he tends to assign an instrumental value to institutions and traditions, hence his assertion that “there is no single type of family, anymore than there is a single type of religion, that is essential to personal security and collective prosperity.”^[22] At times it seems that Nisbet is more concerned with what *works* than with what *is*. In a similar vein, he claims that a strong connection to the past is important “if only for its functional necessity to revolt.” “How can there be a creative spirit of youthful revolt,” he asks, “when there is nothing for revolt to feed upon but itself?”^[23] Indeed, Nisbet thinks that the disenchantment of the age “would be no misfortune were it set in an atmosphere of confident attack upon the old and search for the new.” But Nisbet offers little analysis,

let alone normative appraisal, of the ideas, institutions, and traditions that are the objects of said revolt. In certain places his work suffers from a corresponding inattention to qualitative differences, which leads him to make such breezy and dubious comparisons as between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the modern “political clerisy” devoted to centralized power; the operations of both groups, he casually remarks, lead to a stifling homogeneity, uniformity, and monism of power.[24]

The lack of subtlety in this kind of comparison ill befits a mind as searching and powerful as Nisbet’s. Perhaps his training and enculturation in sociology is to blame; philosophical and theological waters are deep and formidable. Or perhaps Nisbet’s exquisite sensitivity to the liberty of the individual primed him for an allergic reaction to any aggregation of authority. After all, there are distinctly libertarian notes in his conception of freedom, which, he stresses, “lies in the interstices of authority” and is safeguarded only to the extent that one has the possibility of release from any given authority.[25] Ironically, this formulation of freedom threatens to undermine the very institutions of civil society Nisbet considers valuable, for it implies that every social tie is tentative and every authoritative claim defeasible. It is difficult to see how crucially important social institutions such as marriage and the church, which depend upon irrevocable vows and obedience—to say nothing of institutions like the family, in which obligations precede an act of the will—could retain their meaning given such an understanding of freedom.

Nisbet is, of course, especially concerned about freedom from state power. Rather than limiting itself to what it does best—“maintain order”—the modern state routinely impinges upon the liberty of its citizens; the scope of its law virtually limitless, the tentacles of Leviathan invade every quarter.[26]

While Nisbet’s basic instinct regarding the state’s undue accumulation of power is unobjectionable, it needs refining in light of a more adequate conception of freedom and political authority. According to Catholic social thought, freedom is the fulfillment of our nature, a kind of flourishing achieved only through the cultivation of virtue. But cultivating virtue is a social enterprise, resting not only on the initiative of the individual but also, crucially, the aid of many other agents, from the family to friends to the church and school to the neighborhood and even the state. In accord with the principle of subsidiarity, the latter shouldn’t usurp the proper authority and functions of any other unit, but by the same token it enjoys its own sphere of competence. And that sphere includes not only the minimalist liberal task of maintaining order but more importantly the promotion of the common good, which includes the moral health of the citizenry.

So, from a Catholic perspective, legal restrictions in a range of areas Nisbet deems “private” (for instance, pornography and sexual relations) would not in principle violate individual liberty properly understood. In fact, they may be critical to achieving virtue—the *sine qua non* of freedom. Further, such laws might be indispensable to maintaining the kinds of institutions, associations, and traditions that comprise civil society.[27]

Nisbet’s vision of social pluralism is a rich and appealing one. His essential insight that “neither moral values, nor fellowship, nor freedom can easily flourish apart from the existence of diverse communities each capable of enlisting the loyalties of its members,” coupled with his warnings about how state power erodes our primary associations, merits long and careful consideration.[28] To do so in light of a Christian anthropology and the insights of the Catholic social tradition promises to enrich this consideration, since the subject of the social order takes on ontological depth and transcendent meaning.

Dr. Jeanne Schindler is a Fellow of the John Paul II Institute. Until 2013 she was an associate professor at Villanova University. Dr. Schindler’s intellectual interests are interdisciplinary, integrating philosophy,

theology, and political science. She has lectured and published in a variety of areas, including Catholic social thought and democratic theory. She edited *Christianity and Civil Society: Catholic and Neo-Calvinist Perspectives* (2008) and co-edited with her husband, D.C. Schindler, *A Robert Spaemann Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Dr. Schindler is a homeschooling mother of three children.

[1] For Sandel, “democracy’s discontent” manifests itself in two primary anxieties: “One is the fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives. The other is the sense that, from family to neighborhood to nation, the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us” (*Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996], 3). Arguably, both stem from the decline of civil society noted by Nisbet.

[2] Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (Oxford University Press, 1970; reprinted with new Preface 1973), 4.

[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 99. Nisbet is similarly concerned about the loss of a sense of history, as he explains: “Man, it is said, is a time-binding creature; past and future are as important to his natural sense of identity as the present. Destroy his sense of the past, and you cut his spiritual roots, leaving momentary febrility but no viable prospect of the future” (*Quest for Community*, x).

[4] Tocqueville, vol. 2, 10.

[5] Robert Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), xi.

[6] Nisbet’s designation follows Dr. Johnson’s evocative description of the man who “hung loose upon society” (Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988], 87).

[7] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 10.

[8] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 49.

[9] *Ibid.*, 54.

[10] Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, 76.

[11] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 62.

[12] Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, 76.

[13] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, ix.

[14] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 278; *The Present Age*, 139; *The Twilight of Authority*, 252.

[15] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 104.

[16] Robert Nisbet, *The Social Bond: An Introduction to the Study of Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 46–47.

[17] *Ibid.*, 45–46.

[18] Nisbet, *The Present Age*, 112.

[19] Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, 213.

[20] *Centesimus Annus*, §49 in *The Social Agenda: A Collection of Magisterial Texts*, eds. Robert A. Sirico and Maciej Zieba (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 31.

[21] Hittinger helpfully identifies a development in Catholic social thought beginning with the Pisan encyclicals according to which institutions possess “social munera” (missions or vocations) akin to the threefold mission of priest, prophet, and king (the *triplex munera Christi*) that every baptized Christian is called to respond to. See his “Social Pluralism and Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Doctrine,” in *Christianity and Civil Society: Catholic and Neo-Calvinist Perspectives*, ed. Jeanne Heffernan Schindler (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 11–29.

[22] In this instrumentalist mode, Nisbet states even more clearly that with reference to the social goods of cohesion and prosperity, “religion is not indispensable so long as there is some other pattern of meanings and purposes which will do the same thing” (“Moral Values and Community” in *Tradition and Revolt: Historical and Sociological Essays* [New York: Random House, 1968], 136).

[23] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, x.

[24] Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, 259.

[25] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 270.

[26] Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority*, 221.

[27] A concrete example of this can be found in Michael Sandel’s illuminating discussion of obscenity jurisprudence. In what would spark fierce constitutional controversy, the city of Renton, Washington, passed an ordinance restricting the location of pornographic theaters, and it did so precisely on the grounds that such establishments would damage civil society. As Sandel recounts, the city council argued that the presence of “adult” theaters “‘gives an impression of legitimacy to, and causes a loss of sensitivity to the adverse effect of pornography upon children, established family relations, respect for marital relationship and for the sanctity of marriage relations of others,’ and that locating such entertainment in close proximity to homes, churches, parks, and schools ‘will cause a degradation of the community standard of morality’” (*Democracy’s Discontent*, 78). One can find a similar rationale in laws designed to discourage sexual vice, such as the statute overturned in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), which prohibited the distribution of contraceptives to unmarried persons.

[28] “Moral Values and Community,” 141.

Religious Liberty and the Reality of the Christian Tradition

D. C. SCHINDLER

When thinking about religious liberty in the United States, we typically ask how religious faith may best be protected and fostered within the American legal system, whether as that institution was originally conceived or as it has lately become. But it is possible to reverse the perspective and the standard by which religious liberty is measured. Instead of assessing the status of religion from within the horizon set by law, we might instead assess the law on this question from within the horizon of religion, interpreted first according to its own measure. This is what I propose to do in this brief reflection, taking the classical Christian tradition rather than the contemporary American situation as the given starting point. The very fact that both the question and the nature of religious freedom proves to be so radically different (as we will see) whether it is viewed from the one starting point or the other is itself something already worthy of serious reflection, even if we cannot pursue this particular reflection here. Instead, in this brief essay, we will begin with an observation made by St. Augustine, in the early days when the question of religious freedom first became an issue in the Christian world. Then I will expand on aspects of his observation insofar as it concerns more generally the significance of political institutions for religion, before turning directly to the question of what all of this has to do specifically with the legal issue of religious freedom.

In the world of political theology, St. Augustine is often thought of as the one who definitively separated the theological order from the political in the radical distinction he drew between the City of God and the City of Man. According to a common interpretation, the former, constituted by a love of God to the point of contempt for the self, lies most basically in the mysterious depths of the human heart. The citizens of this City are ultimately known only to God. The City of Man, by contrast, built up by the love of self to the point of contempt for God, is essentially *visible* and makes its presence felt *in this world*. In Augustine's age, the City of Man was manifest, above all, in the Roman empire, which had established itself by violence in the pursuit of worldly glory. In this view (leaving aside the question of whether it accurately represents Augustine's understanding or not), a person could find himself subject to the earthly city as a result of coercive force, but membership in the City of God can never come about by such means. Instead, as an essentially spiritual reality, one's belonging to God in and through Christ can occur only through the interior act of freedom elicited by grace.

In the middle of his episcopal career, St. Augustine underwent a "second conversion," less dramatic and epoch-making than his well-known conversion to Christianity, but more immediately related to our present theme. Over the course of his involvement with the Donatist controversies in which the Church was embroiled in the fourth through the sixth centuries, Augustine experienced a significant change of opinion regarding how best to deal with the heresy, which had affected not just isolated individuals but entire populations. The nature of the controversy itself is already profoundly significant for the question of the political implications of Christianity. The Donatists believed that the sacraments conferred by priests who had apostasized during the Diocletian persecutions, and then returned to the faith when the danger had passed, were invalid, but the Church eventually determined that the efficacy of the sacraments did not depend on the purity of the priest. One of the questions raised by the heresy

is whether the subjective condition of the priest determines the validity of the sacraments he confects. What is at stake, here, is the extent to which the redemptive deed of Christ, which is the origin of the Church, has an *objective* reality that transcends the *subjective* faith of believers, whether that faith be considered individually or collectively as a whole.

Christ assumed the whole of humanity in his assumption of the individual human nature received from and through his mother Mary. Politics is about the final end of human existence, and so politics has an essential relation to the Christian claim. The claim cannot be avoided; it can only be affirmed or denied.

The change in Augustine's thinking concerned the question of how best to deal with the influence of this heresy in the relatively newly-established Christian culture of the Roman empire: ever convinced of the essential freedom of faith, he came to see that this essential freedom does not mean that the faith ought to be approached merely as a matter of interior conviction; instead, he realized that the institutional dimension can have a significant bearing on the exercise of the freedom of faith. In his words:

originally my opinion was that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom we knew as avowed heretics feigning themselves to be Catholics. But this opinion of mine was overcome not by the words of those who controverted it, but by the conclusive instances to which they could point. For in the first place there was set over against my opinion my own town, which, although it was once wholly on the side of Donatus, was brought over to the Catholic unity by fear of the imperial edicts, and which we now see filled with such detestation of [that] ruinous perversity that it would scarcely be believed that it had ever been involved in [the Donatist] error. (*Letter 93*, from *A Sourcebook*, ed. O'Donnell, 132)

There are some who take this change of heart to be a sign of cynical old age and a growing pessimism regarding human nature. But it is crucial to see that Augustine *did not* change his mind about the essential freedom and non-coercibility of the act of faith; he just saw that what we might call external conditions in which such an act happens to occur can have a profound effect on that act, whether suffocating or liberating it. This should not surprise someone who has studied carefully Augustine's *Confessions*. In that book, Augustine argues that objective conditions in which a person finds himself, one's actual state of being, can help or hinder one's act of freedom. The will does not operate in a vacuum; instead, it is enacted always within the antecedently given actuality, the given history, of the person, with his established habits and the institutionalization of his soul in his body, so to speak. A life of sin can create an ingrained reluctance, in spite of oneself and what one otherwise wills, so that genuine freedom requires a rehabilitation of the whole person. The objective conditions out of which the act of freedom arises are either disposed to the assent to God or disposed against that assent; there is no neutral state. It is not difficult to see that there is an analogy between the way Augustine interprets his own act of freedom in the *Confessions* and his eventual interpretation of the acts of faith within the established law of the city in *Letter 93*. The reasons he offers in this letter for the success of this redemption of his hometown from Donatism are illuminating, even if he provides little explanation in that context for his judgments. The "fact" of the institutional recognition of the Catholic truth, he says, helped those who privately saw the truth, but were reluctant to affirm it for a variety of reasons: some had a fear of offending their neighbors; others had been held back from the truth by custom; others found the common practice of Donatism the path of least resistance. Generally, people had

remained Donatist because that's just the way things were done, so to speak, or because they had been born into it (132–33). His description of the obstacles to the assent to truth generated by the city's established rule of life sound very much like the story of the internal resistances to his own personal assent to truth he wrestled with in the *Confessions*.

There is no space in the present context to work out this analogy between Augustine's coming to faith in the *Confessions* and the town's returning to faith after Donatism and its implications for political theology, though I think this would be fascinating and eminently worthwhile. Instead, what I want to do here is to make a *stronger case* for the political recognition of the truth of the Church than the case Augustine makes in this letter, though it follows the thrust of his point. A great deal of matter for reflection, inquiry, and analysis is opened up in what Augustine wrote to the Donatist bishop Vincentius, but in this abbreviated forum, I want to limit myself to making three basic claims, two descriptive and one prescriptive. In the centuries that have passed from Augustine to the Middle Ages and into modernity, first of all, we have deepened the sense of the significance of law. Secondly, we have deepened the sense of why the cultural and indeed the political dimension of existence is essential to the faith, why it is an indispensable implication of the ontological reality of Christian truth. The third point is that the legal question of religious freedom that confronts us today ought to be considered from the perspective of this deepened vision, for reasons I will propose at the end.

1) Augustine, in the passage quoted, seems to identify law and political establishment with coercive power. It is perhaps not surprising that he does so, given that he is writing in the time of the late Roman Empire, and it is a common enough assumption in our own age, which tends to recognize only a pragmatic function of law. But the possibility for a more substantial understanding of legal institutions emerged, in principle if not also in practice, in the Middle Ages. Through a more ample appropriation of the Greek sense of nature as order, the Roman sense of authority and the common good, and the Jewish sense of law as an essential mediator of the presence of God, we have the resources to understand that law has a pedagogical and indeed *revelatory* dimension, which is more basic than its coercive function. In this context only the basic thesis can be stated, but the necessary argument cannot be given. What I mean by “revelatory dimension” is this: the law is inevitably and willy-nilly an enactment of a particular understanding of the nature and destiny of man, whether it intends to be or not. The law cannot but give expression to a positive conception of the meaning of human existence. It is not accidental that law has always originally grown out of religion and cannot fail to give evidence of its roots. Severance from those roots means death. On this general theme, we may consider a fascinating passage from the great legal historian Harold Berman, whose work was largely devoted to showing the connection between law and religion. If we were to ask today why one should obey the law, Berman writes, the answer usually given

is that people generally observe the law because they fear the coercive sanctions which will otherwise be imposed by the law-enforcing authority. This answer has never been satisfactory. As psychological studies have now demonstrated, far more important than coercion in securing obedience to rules are such factors as trust, fairness, credibility, and affiliation. It is precisely when law is trusted and therefore does not require coercive sanctions that it is efficient; one who rules by law is not compelled to be present everywhere with his police force. Today this point has been proved in a negative way by the fact that in our cities that branch of law in which sanctions are most severe—namely, the criminal law—has been powerless to create fear where it has failed to create respect by other means. Today everyone knows that no amount of force which the police are capable of exerting can stop urban crime. In the last analysis, what deters crime is the tradition of being law-abiding, and this in turn depends upon a deeply or passionately held conviction that law is not only

an instrument of secular policy but also part of the ultimate purpose and meaning of life. (*Interaction of Law and Religion*, 28–29)

Indeed, law exists, not just to deter crime, but in the most basic instance to make real a form of existence, and, in so doing, to manifest “the ultimate purpose and meaning of life” in the order of actuality. In fact, the institution of law cannot avoid determining some fundamental purpose as proper, however unintentional this may be. The legal political order sets the horizon of meaning and so communicates an interpretation of reality and the purpose of life coincident with, but in addition to, its regulation of behavior. The practical and the revelatory dimension of law cannot be separated.

2) In the letter I cited, Augustine makes what we might describe as an essentially *pragmatic* argument for the legal enshrining of “the Catholic truth.” The political establishing of this truth, and the critique of Donatism, helps “the many” to make a proper and free act of assent, which would otherwise have been difficult and perhaps for some even impossible. While I think there is an important truth to the pragmatic argument, given the claim we have just made above, I would want to formulate the point in a more essential way: it belongs to the *nature* of Christianity to be established in the real world and officially recognized by the institutions that constitute and order the political community. To say this is not improperly to immanentize the eschaton, make Christianity dependent on the temporal, political order, or compromise the transcendence of the kingdom of God—any more than God’s generous assumption of human nature compromises his eternal divinity. The official recognition of the Church’s authority, moreover, does not imply a denial of what is called “Gelasian dyarchy,” the doctrine that the pope and the king represent two distinct ruling powers. The ultimate reason for institutionalizing the Church’s presence in the political order is not just because it represents or provides an effective way of regulating practice. In other words, the point is not just that this institutionalizing is helpful for behavior, a good means to the faith, which is ordered ultimately to a strictly eschatological fulfillment. Instead, it belongs to the logic of the Incarnation of Christ to be so embodied in the flesh of the world, as it were. There is an analogy, then, between this point and the point at issue in the Donatist controversy. The faith is not a purely interior, subjective transaction, so to speak, between the private individual and God, and not even such a private faith given public expression in consort with others. Instead, the faith is itself an incarnate reality. The Christian truth lays claim to the *whole* person, body and soul, and the whole person includes the person’s life in the world, in the public order. Indeed, it not only includes this, but arguably attains a certain culmination in this order: as the classical Christian tradition recognized, through that tradition’s appropriation of the Greek wisdom, man is by nature *a political* animal (and not just a social animal). Moreover, politics is properly determined by the truth of man—the *whole* truth. If Christianity lays claim not just to the interior assent of the heart, but to the whole person, body and soul, then it necessarily belongs in the political sphere *as* political. We cannot affirm the reality of the sacraments as essential to Christian life without also affirming the political extension of the Church, insofar as these both concern the trans-subjective aspect of the faith. This claim can be shown to be true both in principle and historically.

The question of the political establishment of Christianity is of course quite controversial, and it is evaluated quite differently by Catholics, the Orthodox, and Protestants. One of the things that the growing contemporary crisis has made increasingly clear is that we need to recover the properly *cosmological* weight of the Christian vision, and this means its cultural and even political dimension. Christ assumed the whole of humanity in his assumption of the individual human nature received from and through his mother Mary. Politics is about the final end of human existence, and so politics has an essential relation to the Christian claim. The claim cannot be avoided; it can only be affirmed or denied. In this sense, the question of the legal recognition of the truth of Christianity is not simply a matter of utility—how do we best foster Christian faith—but about the truth of the Incarnation, and it will bear

on the quality of faith precisely insofar as it recognizes or fails to recognize the intrinsic significance of the political order for the Church's mission. I hasten to add that arguing for an official and legally enshrined recognition of the truth of the Christian faith does *not* mean coercing membership in the Church. As we have seen, law is not simply the articulation of coercive force, but more fundamentally an expression of ultimate purpose. Moreover, if the Christian faith is essentially free, then insofar as law serves the Church it must seek to establish conditions that precisely prevent the coercion of faith.

3) My argument thus far is that, on the one hand, law as the institution of political order has an essential religious dimension, and that, on the other hand, Christianity is not just a "faith," but also by its very logic implies a culture, or, better, a *form of common existence* that as such necessarily includes embodiment in law. The final point, then, is that, if this is true, it bears directly on the question of the nature of religious freedom as a legal matter. As we mentioned at the outset, one typically conceives the right to religious freedom as the protection that an otherwise secular government provides for the peaceful exercise of faith—whether that exercise be understood in the older sense of the public worship of God and respect for certain Christian values, or in the more recent sense of purely private belief of any sort whatsoever, faith in anything or nothing at all. From the classical Christian perspective, this understanding of the right to religious freedom gets freedom wrong, it gets religion wrong, and it gets the nature of rights as a fundamental political phenomenon wrong. In fact, it is not wrong on all of these counts only in the sense of affirming just a partial truth, which would need to be complemented culturally and in the sphere of civil society by a fuller context and set of justifications. Instead, it is wrong in the much more insidious sense of positively excluding the truth of the matter. Christianity is not a mere set of propositions, to which one might give or withhold one's private assent, or a mere way of worshiping, which represents a sort of "side practice" juxtaposed to normal human life; instead, it is a form of existence that discloses the meaning of the whole of reality and bears on everything we think and do, both privately and as a people. To the extent that the right to religious freedom prohibits the recognition of the truth of religion, as a form that comprehends the whole of existence, antecedent to the exercise of individual choice, the very right to religious freedom excludes the possibility of religion. It is in this respect a self-contradiction. Freedom *for* religion can only be such if it in fact allows that to which it gives the right.

Interpreted positively, from the perspective of the classical Christian tradition, the right to religious freedom would have to mean the politically established conditions that enable individuals to participate in the real faith of the Church, which is the extension of the body of Christ into the space and time of the world in history. This formulation is of course radically different from the one implied in the conventional notion, so different that the two formulations may be said to be mutually exclusive. What, then, are we to do when the same words admit of opposite meanings, and the sense that monopolizes public discourse is the one that undermines a genuinely Christian interpretation? There is of course no simple solution. Instead of trying to present one, I will conclude in an open-ended way with three basic observations. First, we have to recognize that it is in fact more important to figure out, and attempt to understand, what is true than it is to determine practical measures. (Is belonging to the Church the true way to understand religious freedom or not?) Second, recognizing practical matters as secondary does *not* mean that any less attention needs to be given them. They do not become any less urgent. The point is simply that they may not be permitted to set the limits for the meaning of things. There is a kind of tragedy, for example, built into the task of providing legal defense for those who attempt to live fidelity in a culture and political system that holds such things in contempt, but acknowledging this does not mean surrendering to that system. The defense must be made, and given current circumstances this inevitably means appealing, according to the principle of prudence, to the right to religious freedom, even as it is conventionally understood, but I propose we ought to think of this as something like treating cancer with chemotherapy. Such treatment may be in certain

circumstances absolutely necessary to save a person's life, but we have to recognize that the means used is poisoning the body, and so we ought to proceed with caution, with a clear sense of limits, and with a great deal of regret. Finally, in our effort to recover a proper sense of religious freedom and indeed a healthy political order, it is not enough to go back to the Founding of America and its obviously Christian ethos. Instead, we need to regraft America, as far as possible, onto the deeper tradition from which it attempted to break, even while taking with it certain concepts and ideals. The organic image of "regrafting" is important: the tradition is a source of life, and the leaves and branches it produces, not to mention the fruits, have an inevitable tendency to wither and go bad when severed from the trunk and indeed the roots. One of the tasks in recovering religious freedom is interpreting America against herself, so to speak, by rethinking the ideals from their original roots. We thus relativize America and her world-historical significance, but we relativize her precisely to that which can give her genuine substance: namely, the truth of reality.

*D. C. Schindler is Associate Professor of Metaphysics and Anthropology at the John Paul II Institute, an editor of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, and the author of *The Catholicity of Reason* (Eerdmans, 2013) and *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel Between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Cascade Books, 2012), among others.*

Properly Seeing the Past in Order to Imagine a Better Future

CONOR B. DUGAN

Jones, Andrew Willard, *The Two Cities: A History of Christian Politics* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2021).

A common theme of many postliberal thinkers is that we are too often hemmed in by the boundaries and limits of contemporary thinking. As David Schindler, D.C. Schindler, Michael Hanby, Patrick Deneen, and others have been arguing, new political and social forms are not possible without imagination. By limiting ourselves to liberalism's categories, we necessarily limit what may come next. But we cannot expand our imaginations without viewing history properly. That is, if we approach history through the lens of a twenty-first-century secular liberal, we will necessarily see history as a series of events that conform to the labels and forms of secular liberalism. We will be limited in what we see in the past and, thus, necessarily limit what we can propose for the future.

In *The Two Cities: A History of Christian Politics*, Andrew Willard Jones offers a history that is an antidote to such a limited view. *The Two Cities* is a comprehensive account of political and social history from creation to the present. In truth, Jones's book is really a history of the *world*. Jones allows us to see things we may have missed and therefore imagine possibilities that exceed those bequeathed us by liberalism.

Every history requires a starting point. Every history requires a narrative. No history is neutral. And Jones's is not either. He writes: "Everything that happened before the Incarnation was leading up to it, and everything that has happened since can only be understood through it." Jones reads everything in light of Christ's coming in the flesh and his founding of the Church to extend his presence through time and space. God-made-flesh means *everything* has importance. Thus, "Christianity is not about our private lives, and it is not merely about where we go after we die. Christianity is about *everything* in the cosmos, and the cosmos moves in time" (emphasis added). Jones also rejects the modern view of man as first an individual separate from others, who chooses to be in relationship. Rather, he employs a Christian anthropology, seeing that each person is born into a family and is constituted by the web of relationships into which he is born, the most fundamental of which is his relation to God. Ultimately, Jones offers his book as a "historical narrative that is Christian through and through and which is capable of understanding modernity from within the truth of Christianity and not the other way around."

If Christians return to seeing history through the light of the Incarnation, God-made-man condescending himself to the world to redeem and purify it—lift it higher—they stand a chance. Success is not a Gospel category. We are called to faithfulness.

To take on this daunting task of understanding all of history through Christianity, Jones employs Augustine's image of the two cities, the City of God and the City of Man. The former is a "downward-looking city" that "descend[s] through selfishness to perfect misery in complete war with God, neighbor, and self." The latter, on the other hand, is an "upward-looking city," "ascend[ing] through grace to perfect peace in perfect love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self." The cities commingle and the "plot of this history . . . is not simple progress." "It is filled, rather, with ups and downs, with advances and reversals, with corruptions and reforms"—though always marked by God's interventions, most significantly his becoming man in Christ.

Jones truly writes a history of everything—a history of the cosmos from creation to the present. He begins with a sketch of creation and the time before the Incarnation. He then moves on to Christ's coming in the flesh, his founding of the Church and its development, its place in the Roman Empire, the rise of monasticism, and the crumbling of the Western Roman Empire. Jones then describes the Church in the Medieval, Early Modern, Modern, and Postmodern periods. He ends on a hopeful note about what is to come.

While there is so much in Jones's book one could dwell upon, I'll highlight just a few aspects. First is the remarkable breadth and depth of this work. In reading it, never did I feel that he skimmed or left me wanting more. If anything, there were times when I thought he could have moved more quickly through a particular period. Nor does Jones gloss over or romanticize history. Rather, his is a sober, honest account while at the same time being sympathetic and charitable. Whether he is describing actions taken by the Church or ideas proposed by the most hardened atheist, Jones attempts to understand his subjects' motivations from the inside—but always in light of the Incarnation.

Second, I was struck by Jones's deft handling of nominalism. In just five pages, he unlocks the concept, shows how it differs from realism, and helps us to understand its deleterious effects on the Early Modern Church. It is also striking to note how infected the contemporary world—including the Church—is by this intellectual error.

Third is Jones's description of how the wars of religion actually were pivotal in creating "religion" as a "distinct category of human action." "They are wars of religion *only* in retrospect" (emphasis added). Indeed, these wars helped *create* the modern categories of "the political" and "the religious." But in the standard contemporary history, these wars are pointed to as the reason that religion must be cabined away from public life (as if that were even possible). Jones also demonstrates how the rise of "the political" vis-à-vis "the religious" has led to a world in which the *State* dominates.

Fourth, Jones recognizes liberalism as a distinct theory every bit as ideological as nationalism and socialism. It is so easy for us to think of nationalism and socialism as perversions of mainstream Western thought. Liberalism, so the story goes, is the good and basic form of society from which these corruptions depart. But Jones argues that liberalism is every bit as totalizing as these other ideologies and, thus, just as much a threat to Christianity as they are. While postliberal philosophers, theologians, and political theorists have been making this point with great urgency in recent years, it is helpful to hear it from a historian, putting liberalism in its proper historical context.

Fifth, Jones's account of the Second Vatican Council is one of the best summaries and fairest assessments of the Council I have seen. He discusses its theological background and key documents, its genuine innovations and radical christological core. At the same time, Jones honestly points out tensions and ambiguities in the Council's documents. Such a balanced presentation is especially needful now.

Sixth, Jones is perceptive in his analysis of the crisis in the Church of the last fifty or more years. He writes that the “discord that rocked the postconciliar Church in the West was in large part, then, a fight that occurred within a general capitulation to the liberal notion that Christianity was merely a religion that operated within a secular world.” The problem is that Catholics—whether of the conservative or liberal variety—are not *radical* enough. “Neither side thought that the entire social organism, the entire political, economic, legal, and moral order, from the largest of societal structures to the everyday actions of individual Christians, could find its end of true freedom and peace only through a top-to-bottom conversion to Christ and the acceptance of his healing and elevating grace.” The lack of radicalness has led to the integration and assimilation of the Church into liberalism.

Jones nevertheless ends on a hopeful note. He sees the Church’s integration to liberalism as a potential blessing. “Could it be that providence has allowed the Church to fall into the profound worldliness in which it currently finds itself so that the reform movement that will emerge will be a reform not only of the Church but of the postmodern world itself?” If Christians return to seeing history through the light of the Incarnation, God-made-man condescending himself to the world to redeem and purify it—lift it higher—they stand a chance. Success is not a Gospel category. We are called to faithfulness. And from faithfulness comes fruitfulness. Jones writes that “[p]erhaps the Church won’t break free from the world’s domination until the faithful stop thinking of the Church as merely a little corner of the world and allow themselves to be led not by the powerful, but by the religious, by the meek.” If we allow ourselves to be led by Christ, our meek King, the Church can become again an oasis of peace, drawing the world upward and offering *everything* as a pleasing sacrifice to the Father through the Son. Jones’s book is history at its best, setting us up to imagine *and create* a more hopeful and civilized future.

Conor B. Dugan is a husband, father of four, and attorney who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Generative Integration: Gift, Community and Creation

DANIEL A. DRAIN

Taylor, Michael Dominic, *The Foundations of Nature: Metaphysics of Gift for an Integral Ecological Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, conceived of the relationship between God and the world in the following terms:

[I]f the expression, the independence of temporal affairs, is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear. For their part, however, all believers of whatever religion always hear His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures. When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible. (GS, 36)

Michael D. Taylor's recent work, *The Foundations of Nature: Metaphysics of Gift for an Integral Ecological Ethic*^[1] is a clarion call to a global culture that has largely become unable to understand itself, that has grown "unintelligible." Taylor is to be commended for writing such a fine text that does very many things masterfully. It unfolds a brief history of metaphysics; shows the incoherence of viewing the world in the way that so many of us, qua (post)modern, can't help but do (i.e., technologically); explicates the insidious but ineradicable presence of a technological paradigm present in the genesis, development, and unfolding of liberal bioethics; thinks through what it means to see the created universe in light of a Creator God; and also, perhaps most significantly, offers several responses to the all-too-pressing question, What are we to do?

God sees each thing that he has made, and sees that it is good. Put most plainly: somehow, it is good to be not-God. But even that is not the whole story. Only after the creation of man as the dual-unity of man and woman does God look again at all that he has made and sees that it is, indeed, very good.

Taylor brings to the table not only remarkable chops as a philosopher, metaphysician, and theologian, but, just as importantly, experience and expertise in bioethics and ecology. He is a master of science in the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition who has put "first things first" and because of that can see every other thing in astonishing detail. Because of his unique formation as a thinker, Taylor can deftly provide diagnoses and re-readings of modern schools of thought that are so clarifying, so therapeutic, that one cannot help but feel refreshed. Consider the following description of the phenomenon of the

evolution of life considered in light of a metaphysics of gift:

These three sisters [truth, goodness, and beauty] are the mark of existence and go where it goes. It is no wonder that the development of life has favored forms that are most receptive to the truth of their surroundings, which has guided the evolution of increasingly more accurate sense organs and central nervous systems capable of interpreting the truth of reality. It has favored those creatures most capable of achieving the goodness appropriate to their particular nature, and so we admire the myriad ways living beings have adapted to reality.

Like most millennials, my usual engagement with “nature” is through documentaries I can stream online just like any other entertainment consumable; Taylor’s book reignited in me a deep desire to get out of the house, let my daughter play in the dirt, and try and see how many species of insect we could find in our yard. That alone is worth the price of admission. But the depth and richness of Taylor’s work goes well beyond encouraging outdoorsmanship.

In an essay titled, “On the Christian’s Capacity to See,” Hans Urs von Balthasar laments the obfuscating effects of the modern technological worldview which has wreaked havoc upon our ability to perceive reality as a symbol of God, saying, “Our technology pulls all symbols to pieces.”^[2] Though we cannot afford to underestimate how destructive it is to see the world as a concatenation of parts outside of parts, apt only for violent manipulation by an external, mastering force, Balthasar does not leave us hopeless; even this deprivation of vision might spur us blind moderns to stumble around in the dark long enough to encounter God again. Or, as he puts it,

The technologized world awakens in many people a yearning for the “truly blessed night” in which God visited mankind and redeemed it through his suffering. In this yearning, they realize their blindness and burst out with petition; “Lord, let me receive my sight”—to see the figure that your Word took upon himself in his Incarnation, the figure that can be read only by those who see the divine majesty and the divine humility shining forth from Christ’s human countenance and gestures. . . . [F]or whatever happens we are guaranteed at least this: the God who graciously gives himself is powerful enough to impress his figure on those who wish to follow him. Whether the world chooses to recognize this image or not, its presence gives those who bear its form the power to become shapers of form in their turn.^[3]

Those of us determined to fight off this technologically-induced myopia would do well with Taylor as our guide. The solution to our blindness is to embrace a metaphysics of gift, which is unfolded in what makes up the central (and longest) chapter of the work, “Thinking through Gift: Contemplating Nature’s Splendor.” Here, Taylor takes us on a tour of the thought of five heavyweight exponents of the metaphysics of gift—Thomas Aquinas, Erich Przywara, Ferdinand Ulrich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and David L. Schindler—and in the course of said tour, ably summarizes what each has to say to us about analogy. Whether you are a seasoned reader of metaphysics strapped for time, unable to engage such giants on their own, or if perhaps you are leading the good life of contemplation outside of any institutional enrollments or commitments, Taylor’s summaries here are invaluable (and, for my part, will be mandatory reading for any intrepid students who come to me for direction). This chapter is worthy of reading and study even if the rest of the book does not interest you.

And while the earlier chapters of *The Foundations of Nature* are each worthwhile in their own right (the genealogy of modernity in the second chapter was particularly helpful), Taylor’s final chapter is especially so, as it draws together all of the best of the foregoing into a new unity from which to engage the “Where do we go from here?” question most fruitfully. Taylor’s entire work can be read as an

answer to the call of *Gaudium et spes* to see the nature of creaturely autonomy aright: through the metaphysics of gift, we come to see the goodness of creation *as creation*. Since it is the case that creation is not merely “a heap,” but is instead a whole that is *more* than the sum of its parts, it is the task of a metaphysics of gift to dynamically, liturgically, unfold the meaning of that “more.” According to Taylor, “[Analogy] is capable of grasping the ‘more’ that neither [a merely ecological explanatory] system’s holism nor the uneasy juxtaposition can adequately characterize.” “The key,” Taylor shows us, “is to see the asymmetrical polar relationship in which gift is prior: the things of the physical world can have instrumental value without being reduced to that value, just as contractual relations can be embraced within the richness of a covenant.”

One of the elements, among many, from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis that ought to shock us is what God himself sees in creation. We would do well to recall that Genesis could not be clearer that Creation is not God; indeed, the rhythmic, poetic, litany-like unfolding of nature’s fecundity—“let them bring forth...each according to its kind”—is a reiteration of Creation’s distinction from God. There is simply God and not-God. But God’s own beholding of not-God (sealed in the promise of play and leisure inherent in the hallowed sabbath day) is its own sort of proto-evangelium: God sees each thing that he has made, and *sees that it is good*. Put most plainly: somehow, it is good to be not-God. But even that is not the whole story. Only after the creation of man as the dual-unity of man and woman does God look again at all that he has made and sees that it is, indeed, *very good*. Man, the image of God, who holds dominion over creation, illuminates for us the truth of the relationship between God and man, man and creation, and therefore God and creation: man and creation each becomes more itself when generatively integrated with God, his law, and the nature of things, which are themselves good.

To record every salutary description, appreciate every distinction, and explicate every new insight in Taylor’s book would entail simply producing a facsimile of his text. Taylor’s book, like his estimation of creation, can only be appreciated by dwelling in it as a gift, thereby seeing it most truly.

Daniel Drain is a Ph.D. candidate at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC and works full-time as a Director of Religious Education in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He also teaches courses as an adjunct in the Department of Philosophy and Theology at DeSales University. Daniel lives in Pennsylvania with his wife, Mary Colleen, and their daughter, Philomena.

[1] A work which was awarded the prestigious [Expanded Reason Award](#) in 2021.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, “On the Christian’s Capacity to See,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol V: *Man is Created* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 74.

[3] *Ibid.*, 76.

A Tale of Two Cities, Revisited

HERBERT E. HARTMANN

Gilson, Etienne, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God* (trans. James G. Colbert [The Catholic University of American Press, 2020; 1st. ed. 1952]).

Etienne Gilson begins his recently translated work, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*, with these words, “The contemporary world suffers the pains of childbirth. With enormous turmoil a universal society is being born.” These words were uttered in 1952. We, like Gilson, are the witnesses to the process of this childbirth. The major events that we are experiencing are also of “a planetary character.” We, too, can recognize that:

Planetary unity has been achieved. Economic, industrial, and technical reasons in general, all of which we can view as tied to practical applications of the natural sciences, have established a *de facto* solidarity among peoples of the earth. Consequently, their vicissitudes are combined in a universal history of which they are particular aspects. Whatever the different peoples of the world may think about it, they have become parts of a humanity that is more natural than social.

We, even more so than he, are under a growing social pressure to will that humanity devise a means to organize the world into a society. For if we do not act with deliberation to organize our society, the world, and with it, our societies, will be organized haphazardly for us. They both will be organized as if all beings were things and not persons. Economics, modern science, and its technology can only properly order things, and they do so more and more efficiently. And we place the care and direction of our political policies and concerns more and more in the hands of the experts of scientific technology and economics. The organization of a rational society is beyond the specific interests and capacities of these powers alone. What is needed is to form a fitting idea of a universal society of humankind to guide us.

Because Gilson recognized the importance of this problem, he devoted this book to the study of the origin and history of one idea, that of a universal society of man. In his first chapter, the author provides the pre-history that explains how this idea came to be conceived from various pre-conceptual perceptions and lived experiences. In the second, he presents the origin of the idea itself. The idea is born in the work of a theologian, St. Augustine, in his magnum opus, *The City of God*. In chapters three through nine, Gilson then traces the various transformations, or metamorphoses, of the idea of a universal society. In chapter nine, “The City of Scientists,” the idea finds its final transformation in the work of Auguste Comte. Gilson later makes several remarks about Marx and Marxism, for “Marx’s universal society is another sign of the times.” In Marxism “it is no longer spirit that leads but matter.” Here humanity is bound by economic and historical determinism. “None of those whom we have examined from Augustine to Comte would call that a society.” Gilson’s final judgment reads: “Marxism has only slipped down the slope of political imperialism. At the date we write these lines, the candidates to the universal empire are found in Moscow.” “Marxism is the most sustained effort the world has ever known to establish the perfect coincidence of the temporal city and the Earthly City.”

Today we see other, similar ideologies in play. As Gilson's readers learn from Augustine, who lived in the empire of the Romans, the universal society of humankind is not a mere political empire established by force, whether it be historical, martial, or economic. A union of all in common submission is *not* a "union of all in agreement of wills." As Gilson remarks, "The history of our own time abounds in parodies of the City of God."

The merely natural cannot transform itself into something more than the natural, for the human is more than the merely natural and human love is more than a merely natural love. Consent is not enough. Those who would enter into this union with passive acceptance without actually and primarily loving the same one true good of humankind will not be genuinely integrated and united.

In its form, Gilson's work is a study of the history of this one idea and the multiple transformations it undergoes throughout its intellectual history. He does so because he sees in the history of an idea that one can find "the raw material for philosophical reflection." So, this work is a philosophical experiment in which we see what is essential in the idea of a universal society of humankind and what is distortive, or inessential, to the intelligible essence of that idea. The object of this work, he explains, "is to gather some of its data and to clarify the meaning of the question." The main question is: what in itself is the *idea* of a universal human society? Gilson answers that question by uncovering the origin of the idea in its most complete form and tracing its various transformations over time.

Domus, urbs, orbis, these three name the place, or space, wherein a community of persons, what Gilson calls "a society of rational beings," can conceivably be established. A household, a city, and a world can designate an order of things, natural or volitional. But each of these can also name a form of a society of rational beings who can order themselves and their things. Each society, as Gilson following Augustine explains, orders everything and everyone to a shared communal good that is loved by each and every one.

"Physical force is certainly a bond, but it is not a social bond. There is a society only where the harmony of minds and hearts binds the individuals and persons together. Accordingly, those for whom harmony is the bond form a people." They are united by their common order of loves and by their working together for one common and actively shared good. A universal human society or social body will be to the city "what the city itself is to families and through them to individuals, in short a human society worthy of the name." As the city completes the social aspirations and needs found in the family and its members, so the universal society of intellectual beings is to complete the social aspirations and needs of all humans and thus of humanity itself. As Aristotle relates in his *Politics*, the family household is the primary human society, founded upon the natural needs pertinent to preservation and upon the natural need for the propagation and preservation of the species, a need more natural than voluntary. As the household pursues its proper work, there is a further need recognized for a larger societal bond, the village. And the village itself culminates in the recognition of the natural need men have to deliberately and voluntarily form themselves as a people in a city.

Thus, according to Aristotle, the *polis* or city is the perfecting community in which humans as a people can live and live well. It is here and here alone that humans can live nobly and with proper justice. For Aristotle "Justice is something political, for right is the arrangement of the political community, and right is a discrimination of what is just." Such a city is both a political and a social body, or communion, while the family is a social but not yet a political society. For Aristotle the *polis* is *the complete human*

community. There is no society that transcends it because there is no other society which can do the work of justice, for which *telos* the city is established. Aristotle further specifies that this political community could exist *only* if it were neither too small nor too large. For the accomplishment of its work of justice and of living a human life well could be accomplished only if its size met, but did not exceed, the natural limits of human bonding. There is a finite extension of our love and care. The city's completeness is also based upon the fact that the city provided humans with the only society which is self-sufficient, as it alone satisfied the needs of human nature, body *and* soul. Unfortunately for this philosophy, human history has shown that the city as Aristotle conceived it was unable in another respect to be self-sufficient in fact. For the Greek cities were unable to defend themselves from the forces produced by larger trans-political nations and empires. The material finitude of the *urbs* seems to require for its survival a trans-political "political" teaching and a trans-political space or realm. There would appear to be a limit to be found then only in the limit of the *orbis* itself. Thus our questions: can there be a cosmic order which is not merely an order of things, a merely martial or economic order? Can there be a planetary state? Can there be a universal society of humankind, and if there can be, must it also be a world government or state?

The *idea* of a universal society of man, according to Gilson, first appeared in Augustine's *City of God*. As a theologian inspired by faith, Augustine found that in the history of humankind there is, in fact, a single source behind the variegated streams of history across cultures and time. He also sees that this source very quickly generates two societies that include all of humankind, the City of God and the Earthly City. The Earthly City "aspires to the universality that is initially attributed to the City of God." This theology of history is the thought that "alone unveils the origin and end of history." Gilson notes that Augustine can write a universal history, a theology of history, and not itself a philosophy of history, because, through faith his "project" implied the prior acknowledgement of the unity of humankind and, consequently, the unity of history. That the history of man is one and universal is because it starts with a single human who is the immediate source of all other humans. It would be a single universal society *if* every intellectual being were united in one society because they each shared the one love of the One who is the good and the true. There are, in fact, two Mystical Cities because Adam's progeny chose to follow as their final good either that of Cain or Abel. "Therefore, Augustine never conceived the idea of a single universal society, but of two, which are universal at least in the sense that every human, whoever he is, is necessarily a citizen of one or the other."

Gilson concludes by proposing what lessons we can learn from this "history of the City of God and the avatars it has assumed during the course of the centuries." First, this City "cannot be metamorphosized." More importantly, we learn "that every attempt to usurp its title and goal can bring misfortunes to the human societies that claim to realize it on earth." Why is this so? The City of God binds its citizens by means of the knowledge included in faith, hope, and love, while these usurpers depend on a merely human bond of science or philosophy. They seek the peace of God by merely human means and through a human mode of peace, which is merely a cessation of conflict without the bond of a common love. Gilson recognizes that "science, letters, law, philosophy and even so much technology" unite humans more and more closely. "But the size of a society does not change its essence." A society must live upon one truth. It must be in accord with what Augustine proposed as its essence: "a collection of human beings sharing in the love of one and the same good." The merely natural cannot transform itself into something more than the natural, for the human is more than the merely natural and human love is more than a merely natural love. Consent is not enough. Those who would enter into this union with passive acceptance without actually and primarily loving the same one true good of humankind will not be genuinely integrated and united. "The stones of the city are not the living rock." Our politics, the City of Man, can move stones, but it cannot move human hearts.

Comte seems to understand this, and he proposes a remedy greater than mere coercion, a remedy that still animates in our time. The remedy seems to confirm, in its own way, a truth that Augustine taught. We need a faith to bind us together. For Comte “demonstrated that the science of things cannot be the unifying truth of humans or the bond of their society.” Comte finds that our modern society is in need of a religion, with a modern god and a modern mode of faith. He proposes “a positive faith,” a demonstrable faith—the universal faith of men in Science. This, the god of modern rationalism, is what Comte substitutes for the discarded notion of the Christian God and the theological faith of the past. Gilson quotes these words of Comte:

Positivism today comes to take up again the immense task of building, with a suitable doctrine and in a favorable situation, so as to finally determine the definitive formation of the authentic Universal Church...its faith is real enough and complete enough to be equally suited to all parts of the human planet.

Thus, what is needed for a human society is a legitimate spiritual power which can be demonstrated. This new church of humanity will have its own priests and apostles who will “formulate, teach, and maintain the rules according to which political society will be governed, without needing anything to guarantee its authority other than the spontaneous influence exercised by the doctrine’s evidence upon minds and hearts.” Humanity will become “the Great Being of the new religion.” This new religion will, of course, need to punish those who do not share the true faith. It will “command reproof for private faults on up to public reprimand and, if necessary, temporary or permanent ‘social excommunication’ for more serious public offenses.” As Gilson remarks, this scientific positivism is “a human rebellion against God. It is not just an atheism, but antitheism.”

Gilson is not convinced.

If the history of the avatars of the notion of the City of God since the Middle Ages has meaning, it signifies that outside the universalism of faith, a universalism of reason capable of replacing faith has not been found. As paradoxical as it may be, the result of the experiment is clear: even where reason divides, faith unites.

The history of Augustine’s idea “is the history of an obstinate effort to make a temporal city of this eternal city, by substituting for faith any conceivable natural bond as the unifying force of this society.” The final words concluding Gilson’s experiment are: “The City of Man can only be built in the shadow of the cross, as a suburb of the City of God.”

Herbert E. Hartmann is presently an Assistant Collegiate Professor of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America.

Escaping the Cave of Liberalism

WILLIAM P. BEDNARZ

Schindler, D. C., *The Politics of the Real* (New Polity Press, 2021).

Plato argued that man's intellect can liberate him from the unreality of the cave; St. Athanasius, that true religion can liberate him from idolatry, that is, from man calling the unreal, real. In *The Politics of the Real*, D.C. Schindler joins this tradition, identifying our particular cave and our most cherished idol as *liberalism*. For Schindler, liberalism is simultaneously a potent philosophical error and a historical event in which the goods of the Christian social order are replaced with nearly identical substitutes, the "shadows on the wall." The first and most radical response to liberalism, according to Schindler, is to understand it. We cannot find our way out of the cave without first realizing the delusions ("shadows") we believe in—and the reality they imitate. Below I explore Schindler's examination of the forms of reality which our current social order propagates, such as those concerning our conception of God, the legal apparatus, and participation in the Church.

Schindler asserts that the reality mimicked by the delusions ("shadows") is the Church. The Church which ordered the Western world in history has been co-opted by the liberal hegemony. Christianity is not an invisible abstraction, but a "*form*, a concrete and visible reality in the world with an infinite depth and transcendent meaning," which synthesized the Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions into a coherent world. The Church is a *res publica*. This is precisely what liberalism rejects when it extracts man from his tradition and culture (i.e., the Church) and plants him in the imaginary a-social and abstract state of nature. Instead of being thrown into culture, which deepens and realizes human nature, the liberal subject imagines itself as coming from a blank slate indifferent to it. Here, Christianity need not have ever happened.

This belittling of the reality of Christianity begins by belittling God. Theologians from Anselm to William of Ockham de-emphasized God's essence as *potentia ordinata*, meaning power "actualized in a particular way." Instead, they emphasized God's *potentia absoluta*, an absolute power regarding all logical possibilities. God is no longer Pure Act, who reveals Himself uniquely in Jesus Christ. Instead, He is Pure Power, that is, infinite capacity to be actualized in this or that, or any other way. What liberals would come to call "Nature's God" is a de-actualized form of the Christian God, his essence abstracted from his recognized goodness, from his actual, creative activity to which the Church had always responded in worship. God, himself, becomes the ultimate blank slate within a world of blank slates; the One with the most abstract power who creates beings in his image. This shift reflects liberalism's metaphysical reorientation implemented at all levels within the cosmic order: the prioritization of potency over act. By prioritizing potency over act, having abstract power (i.e., money or legal rights) is prioritized over the actual use of power for the good, allowing a society to build a false reality. This commences the politics of the unreal.

The Church and the state are not two separated spheres of power, concerned with

separate ends. Rather, the temporal and the spiritual powers are both within the Church, though in different ways, using different means for moving humanity towards virtue and salvation, material and spiritual means, respectively.

By exchanging God as he actually reveals himself in history for the God of infinite potency, man re-conceptualizes the Creator's presence as potentially open to a plurality of revelations: he is not limited to his *actual* revelation, in Jesus Christ. Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Jefferson utilized this new emphasis to avoid religious violence, conjuring an abstract Being who could be worshiped in different ways, precisely because his revelation as the God of Jesus Christ was no longer a complete act, but rather, merely a particular revelation among an infinity of possible revelations—this latter surplus of power being “God.” This places an inordinate amount of arbitrary power at the disposal of the temporal ruler, since he no longer mediates the authority of God. He wields power tyrannically. He may now control which revelation is acceptable, and in what manner, like the puppet handlers who govern the imitations on the wall of the cave.

Schindler would say that Christianity is now offered in a perverted form. A Christianity that is an “option,” even if it is the correct option, is not Christianity. The real Church is a *res publica* embodying an actuality established in the real order of history: God acts in *this* manner and we cannot but worship Him accordingly. As the images in the cave are a convenient imitation of the real world, the privatized Church is a cheap version of its actual form.

As with God, so with God's image: Schindler argues that the abstract notion of God is mirrored in the liberal order's abstract man. Just as God is no longer the God of Jesus Christ, but absolute Power, man is no longer the one whose proper end is eternal happiness with Christ. He is an abstract power that may decide his end. This is nothing more than a ban on goodness as such; for goodness is not an option among options. Goodness is what already moves the will, already presses upon the person and entices him to act. According to St. Thomas, “Nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in the state of actuality.” This means that, for man, an actual good must always precede his choice of the good. Man cannot choose to participate in the common good unless it already exists. Only an actual good invites our participatory assent to it. In contrast, an arbitrary willful act does not presuppose an invitation of an actual good. When Schindler argues that the “actual reality of the common good is the source of political authority,” he argues that authority is distinguished from mere power, since it responds to, protects, promotes, and is otherwise justified by the actual common good which precedes it. Where this actual good is denied, and humanity is redescribed as seeking its own individual ends amidst various options, authority is degraded into tyranny: What justifies a ruling power in promoting and protecting this (optional) good versus another? The will of man, not the gift of God, becomes the justification for political rule.

Liberalism's tyranny is covertly perpetuated in what Schindler calls “unnatural rights.” A true right is “a social extension of a natural power,” a demand for what is due to a particular being, embedded in a particular social order, according to his particular created capacities. An unnatural right, by contrast, precedes the political body. Like many scholars, Schindler locates the beginning of this tradition in Ockham, who asserted the existence of *ius poli*, a pre-political right granting protection against the pope and monarch. *Ius poli* is a right disconnected from an embedded nature. It is therefore empty of reality because it derives from an imaginary condition of man which purportedly existed prior to social relations.

This creates a condition of codependency between the state and the rights bearer. Since unnatural

rights lack reality, they must be coercively enforced through the state apparatus. Simultaneously, the state's existence results from the social contract, with the sole purpose of protecting such rights. To continue to grant rights, it must perpetuate the artificial reality in which social actors exist. Due to the state's and rights bearers' codependency, this process continues without obstruction, and the political order grows further detached from reality. Current modern discourse of "natural" rights resembles how discussions would take place amongst the prisoners within the cave in which desire to understand *being* is altogether lacking. Without an inclination to understand what a right *is* or from where one derives, most claim protection without thought. Individuals claim arbitrary rights to kill unborn children, redefine marriage, and change their "sex" because the sovereign author of our artificial reality lacks the mandate to obstruct our assertions; indeed, it has the mandate to *promote* such claims. This is the consequence of power wielded by liars and fools.

The ideal political order serves the whole common good. For Schindler, this entails the recognition of a transcendent order which encompasses and extends beyond the temporal horizon. In *De Regno*, St. Thomas claims that man is never in a state of nature in which he has no reference to anything beyond himself. Even if living alone, "each man would be a king unto himself, under God, the highest King, inasmuch as he would direct himself in his acts by the light of reason given him from on high." What this means for authority and law is that it has a fundamentally positive role, namely, to direct the polity towards the transcendent good. Just as the soul gathers up parts of the body and gives life in relation to an end that transcends the body, so does the governing entity for the community, holding it together and guiding it towards its transcendent end. For a polity seeking salvation, only the Church, in its laity and its clergy, can efficaciously fill this role.

However, even if the Church's power is publicly recognized, it cannot be entrapped within the liberal order. If so, it will be barred from its actual form and unable to generously bear witness to the truth. This is Schindler's central claim against integralism, which reduces the Church to a competing sovereign, acting through coercion rather than in and through social conversion. According to Schindler, the Church and the state are not two separated spheres of power, concerned with separate ends. Rather, the temporal and the spiritual powers are both within the Church, though in different ways, using different means for moving humanity towards virtue and salvation, material and spiritual means, respectively. A friendship between these two, ecclesial powers—signified, but not exhausted, in the distinction between the clergy and the laity—better describes the political ideal than any discussion of Church and state, in which "state" is presumed to mean something other than or extrinsic to the Church.

Plato's philosopher-king embodies the ideal authoritative figure, as he escapes the shackles in the cave by receiving the truth of the good in contemplation and acts upon his understanding in generously giving it to those still entrapped in the cave. He rules by means of persuasion rather than coercion. Schindler seems to think that only when the Church is free to embody this publicly authoritative form will we achieve a "politics of the real," one that looks to the whole human good and generously liberates people to pursue it.

The Politics of the Real is a brilliant addition to the postliberal movement. By understanding liberalism as a distortion of the Christian order, we can recognize it as a sustained war upon reality. And we can understand a true postliberalism as nothing more or less than the New Evangelization, the effort of converting entire social orders to Christianity.

William P. Bednarz is a research fellow at New Polity in Steubenville, Ohio. He graduated from Dartmouth College in 2020, where he studied political theory and political economy.

Locke, Hegel, and Covid-19

EDWARD HADAS

The most important lesson from the world's experience with Covid-19 can be summarized with a philosophical slogan: We talk Locke, we act Hegel. Or, to rephrase it in less academic terms: The People's Republic of China is setting the global ideological agenda. I will try to explain all that and also say something about the implications of this New Worldly Order for Christians.

First, though, I need to offer a “trigger warning” for people who have not been traumatized by the standard response to this pandemic: the lockdowns, mandatory social distancing, and lengthy bans on numerous social activities generally considered essential to the good life—education and worship, for example. This article is likely to irritate and confuse all people who accept what I call the “heroic narrative” of the anti-Covid adventure.

Let me be clear about that narrative. I understand that shutting down much of most societies for months, widening the gaps between rich and poor, suspending democratic processes, and creating a children's mental health crisis is widely thought to be heroic: tough but necessary. I accept that all the unprecedented restrictions on normal lives may have delayed a fair number of deaths, as their supporters claim.

Christians can start by not simply accepting governments' judgments of what science says. More importantly, they should remember that the fullness of life consists of far more than being alive. In the face of a pandemic, as in the face of persecution, sometimes you have to give up your life to save it.

However, no one sensible can deny that these measures did a great deal of harm: from increasing obesity to depriving Catholics of many of the sacraments, from delaying romances to increasing child abuse. If the politicians and public health professionals who have supervised these measures were willing to talk about the balance of goods and evils in a coherent way, I would listen. I am potentially willing to be persuaded that the temporary authoritarian re-ordering of almost everyone's lives was truly justified.

The potential has not been actualized. One basic fact about this response is that almost no one in the circles of power has offered anything like a comprehensive social-ethical analysis, and almost no one close to those circles has asked for one. No one is even willing to provide a reasonable explanation for the near-universal decision to keep ignoring the World Health Organization's 2019 recommendation to keep life close to normal during influenza pandemics.

In other words, the most extensive peacetime restrictions on daily life in history have been endorsed unquestioningly by almost everyone with power and influence. The enthusiasm for novel, life-limiting measures remains high as I write this. Vaccine rules that effectively exclude a substantial portion of the population from daily life are being introduced in many countries.

The uncritical silence in the face of such restrictions needs to be explained. I believe that there are many things going on, from groupthink, mass hysteria, and power-hungry politicians to resurgent purity cults, biopolitics, and a search for René Girard's scapegoats. One item on the list of explanations is the exhaustion of the liberal political project. That is the subject of this article.

Intellectually, the first part of the tale can be told as the story of two Johns, Locke and Rawls. Both the 17th-century political philosopher and the 20th-century one have academic industries surrounding them, so I need to acknowledge straight away that I am simplifying massively. I freely admit that Locke was not really a Lockean and that Rawls spent decades trying to mend the holes in his theory.

Still, there is a clear vision that comes out of their shared philosophical tradition. It is democratic: the people should find ways to rule themselves justly. It is tolerant: with a few exceptions, people should be left to adopt their own ideas and construct their own private lives. It is individualistic: membership in all organizations, from families to nations, should be as voluntary as can be managed. And it is pluralistic: we cannot be expected to agree on the truth, so we should expect many different truth-claims to co-exist in a society, and we should be happy about that.

The vision is more idealistic than realistic. As any Christian might notice, there is no room for sin in the Lockean state. It cannot deal well with the selfish people who band together to take over democracies. It does not recognize that angry people do not easily tolerate fools or that some people and ideas are intolerable in any society. It also ignores the fact that societies always have some sort of hierarchical structures, so, roughly speaking, if they do not have extended families and churches, they will have bureaucratic corporations and governments.

Besides, as scores of authors have pointed out for more than a century, too much individualism and too little belonging and believing is bad for people. A Lockean paradise would be filled with alienation, depression, despair, and, as a result, violence and fear. Life might be long and comfortable, but it would be deeply miserable. Those critical authors, from Émile Durkheim to Byung-Chul Han, point out that we are all too close to living in the bleakness of Locke's social contract and Rawls's veil of ignorance.

For all that, we still talk Locke (and Rawls). Catholic bishops routinely praise democracy, academics discuss endlessly the fine point of the varieties and, occasionally, the limits of pluralism, and judges and journalists treat tolerance of personal freedom as if it were the bedrock of our social structures. When governments push people around—I will come back to that tendency in a minute—they invariably claim that they are doing it to promote other people's freedom to think and do what they want. The defenders of abortion, for instance, talk about an individual's right to choose as if that were always and everywhere an obviously good thing.

Abortion is legal in most of the world, but for the most part, the Locke-talk is empty. Democracies have little popular appeal, societies have well-defined and quite narrow bounds of tolerance, pluralism is largely mythical, and our governments are domineering about pretty much everything. The last is crucial for my argument, so consider the scope of governmental authority. Rulers and official bureaucracies now largely control (in alphabetical order) agriculture, education, employment, environmental emissions, healthcare, medical ethics, money and finance, retirement, sexual mores, telecommunications, urban planning, and welfare programs to relieve misery and want.

Meanwhile, the media increasingly follows some government line, and organized religion has been relegated to the periphery of the public consciousness. Lockean individuals can freely participate in civil society and the public square, but always within the limits set by, and generally under the guidance of, huge governmental systems.

Whatever people and pundits may say, few of them seem really to mind living in this non-Lockean world. The pandemic is a good test case. If there were much genuine interest in the principles of Locke and Rawls, then the imposition of anti-Covid rules would have been met with massive protests against the domineering governments.

I might exaggerate. Perhaps the initial “state of exception” (to invoke the distinctly anti-Lockean philosopher Carl Schmitt) would have been accepted—it was a health crisis, after all. However, any true Lockean would soon have been crying out for a reversal, or at least an urgent reckoning of the measures’ wide harms against their narrowly medical benefits.

I’m sure that defenders of the heroic anti-Covid narrative can find ways to reconcile their unquestioning acceptance of authoritarian rule with their underlying liberal Lockean principles. Indeed, I am sure they are sincere about not seeing a contradiction between the two views. They cannot see the irony of complaining about President Trump’s attacks on the democratic process and spirit while asking for more executive orders to mandate masks, vaccines, and whatever restrictions on Lockean freedoms the government deems medically advisable.

Their intellectual complacency deserves to be criticized, but, more importantly, it deserves to be explained. This is where G. W. F. Hegel comes in. As with Locke (and Rawls), I am not talking about the Hegel of the scholars or about the many varieties of Hegelian thought. When I say that we “act Hegel,” I am referring to one of several available interpretations of his philosophy of history.

Hegel saw what he thought was the ineluctable development of freedom through history, as the Spirit became more manifest. In the beginning (the first “moment,” as he put it), freedom was constrained by the arbitrary rules of family and tribe, and by the darkness of ignorance and irrational religion. In these primitive societies, the individual was lost in the group, and everyone lived in fear and ignorance.

At the end of history (roughly the third moment), the completed State will express the full freedom of the Spirit. All the “willfulness” of individuals and of the organizations of their civil societies will be eliminated. Everyone will share the same Spirit, which the State will articulate flawlessly. This ideal and rational Spirit will take the place of revealed religion, and each individual will be fully free—in the identity of his desires and decisions with those willed by the State.

Hegel thought this unified end of history was fairly near, but he underestimated the resistance of willful individuals. To get closer to the goal, the leading ideologues of Hegelian politics, scientific socialists and secular totalitarians, have felt themselves obliged to liquidate significant portions of the population.

With the exception of the Chinese Communists—I will come back to them—these governments have not been able to stay in power. Even great wars, which Hegel strongly approved of, have not managed to create the sort of unity that he envisaged.

The failures are heartening to Christians, but also to Lockeans. In the Lockean model, what Hegel saw as historically retrograde willfulness is considered the apex of freedom. The variety of individual wills supports democratic capitalism, the uneasy consensus of liberal democracies, and a healthy pluralism of lifestyles and beliefs.

However, any gloating over the historical record is premature. As Hegel pointed out, history is cunning. The failure of would-be full-on Hegelian governments is not necessarily a sign that his vision was mistaken. As I pointed out earlier, while people still talk Locke, they increasingly act Hegel. Few of us

live under regimes as openly violent as those of the 20th-century totalitarians, but what then-Cardinal Ratzinger called “the dictatorship of relativism” takes the political form of proto-Hegelian states.

Lockean life is not extinguished. Governments permit fairly large morsels of pluralism and liberal debate—*Humanum* is allowed to publish this article, for example. However, serious deviations from the State’s definition of freedom—freedom of choice, love, business practices, careers, and historical narratives—are marginalized and, as the State deems necessary, punished.

When I say “the State,” I do not primarily mean the politicians, although they have a role to play, often in public relations. What is most important, and here I am thinking more of Max Weber than of Hegel, is the whole bureaucratic apparatus and its extensive webs of law, regulation, taxation, and benefits. These webs reach into every aspect of life. They do that at least as thoroughly as the tribal authorities in Hegel’s first historical moment. The difference, from the State’s perspective, is that the authority then was willful and allowed for exceptions; now it is rational and uniform.

Of course, proto-Hegelian rationality is quite different from the Christian idea of the divine Logos—reason who provides a heaven-oriented order for sin-filled human lives and history. Hegel thought the two rationalities would converge (Christianity would be synthesized into the Spirit), but he did not really take into account how badly the bureaucratic variety is always contaminated with sin.

Christians can explain. As history advances, sin abounds. With grace absent from the Hegelian model, sin can super-abound (cf. Romans 5:20).

And that brings me back to the standard global response to Covid-19. What does a Hegelian see in a pandemic? The same thing he sees in every challenge and every sort of suffering: a call to unify individual wills with the State-defined uniform good. In this case, the State-defined primal good was life, the primal freedom was to be alive. So the State had to control life to liberate it. It was obliged to use its extensive bureaucracies to limit the ways people were allowed to love and flourish. It simply had to restrict life as much as, and for as long as, was necessary to bring the irrational viral invader under the administrative State’s beneficent control.

This telling might sound alarmist. Our societies, after all, will return to something close to pre-pandemic normal life. In England, where I live, that condition has almost arrived. In the heroic narrative, the state of exception is described as an unfortunately necessary interlude, a temporary break in Lockean normalcy. The damage done can mostly be repaired, and with our newfound power over nature, we can hope to avoid imposing such measures in the future.

This narrative is inadequate. It neither questions nor explains the initial and continuing decision to act Hegel. More importantly, it ignores the reality that the abandonment of the accepted response to viral pandemics showed a clear advance of history in a Hegelian direction.

This direction was widely welcomed. The measures were adopted and maintained with far more enthusiasm than regret by leading centrist and liberal politicians, including Joe Biden, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, and Justin Trudeau. In most countries, opposition politicians complained only that the measures were not tough enough.

The full force of government propaganda was unleashed for the cause. The mainstream media eagerly participated. The campaign of fear and authorized science found a ready audience among the people. Opinion polls suggest vast support for the durable restrictions of Lockean freedoms.

The support points to a hard truth—hard at least for the Lockean and Rawlsian political theorists. We act Hegel for a good reason: because for most people the pluralistic society always sits somewhere between the impossible and the unbearable. When times are fairly peaceful, we can tolerate many things, but we are always haunted by fears, despair, and imperfectly controlled antipathy to dissenters. When there is a crisis, society moves to the unbearable side of the continuum. It is time for popular hysteria, harsh restrictions, and unity in intolerance.

Humans are social creatures—they need commitments and communities to thrive. With Lockean freedom, they are on their own. Humans have a natural craving for a transcendental anchor to their lives—with Lockean pluralism, they are adrift. In both peaceful times and crises, the Hegelian State is a poor substitute for a Christian polity built on communion and truth. Still, obedient unity with the State is far more appealing than the emptiness offered by Lockean freedom.

It is now time to keep my promise to come back to China, or more precisely to the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP has no lingering Lockean rhetoric. It is Hegelian to the core. I like to quote the explanation of the role of government that a visiting Chinese student gave a few years ago to a friend of mine, a bewildered American professor of politics. “The government is responsible for protecting the country from disorder.”

That is what the authorities in Beijing try to do. For a still relatively poor country, their administrative state is remarkably efficient and intrusive. A state of exception is often present and always imminent. Any potential disorder, for example from Uyghur Muslims, is re-educated away with cruel vigor.

China is the vanguard of Hegelian history. So, it is not surprising that the global anti-Covid agenda comes out of Beijing. All of it—the tight restrictions, the intense propaganda, the reverence for “science,” the disregard of individual suffering—were trialed in China in the early spring of 2020. At first, Western leaders made some Lockean statements about how their people would not accept such restrictions, but within weeks they had been enticed by the siren song of Hegelian freedom.

What is the lesson in all this for Christians? After the disaster of the Second World War, many believers and their leaders thought they could make peace with Locke. Among many other things, the Second Vatican Council offered a sort of conditional love letter to Lockean notions of freedom, social equality, and individual autonomy. The Magisterial endorsement has never been more than half-hearted, but, as Pius XII recognized in his Christmas addresses during that war, the only available alternative, proto-Hegelian dictatorships, was much worse.

Many Christians are still looking for a live-and-let-live settlement with the Lockean political authorities. Americans cite the Constitution and Europeans point back to the region’s religious heritage and to the Enlightenment’s respect for conscience.

Whether that quest ever made sense may be a good topic for discussion, but the conversation is now pointless. Christians have no Lockean interlocutor. They face only proto-Hegelian authorities: bureaucrats and politicians whose ideology has no room for any religion that is not either totally relegated to the private sphere or totally loyal to the State’s controlling agenda. The Lockean colloquiums may continue in universities and think-tanks, but when action is deemed necessary, the governments’ deeds are Hegelian and the people as a whole happily go along.

During the pandemic, Christian leaders firmly chose the second acceptable alternative condition of religious acceptability. They rushed to demonstrate their loyalty to the governments’ agenda and the heroic narrative that surrounded it. As a tactic in a difficult time, that choice might be defensible. As a

Christian witness to the human calling to love and the fullness of life, it was, in my judgment, inadequate.

If the heroic narrative is right, then my judgment can only be of historical interest, in the Lockean sense of historical as something free people have outgrown. The authorities say that they do not want to repeat the anti-Covid state of exception. They explain that this desire motivates the extension of the state of exception to the rules surrounding vaccines.

However, for Hegelians, historical interest looks forwards as well as backwards. Yesterday's exceptional additions to governmental control are often tomorrow's normal unification of State and individual. History is cunning that way.

In that case, Christians need to do better. They can start by not simply accepting governments' judgments of what science says. More importantly, they should remember that the fullness of life consists of far more than being alive. In the face of a pandemic, as in the face of persecution, sometimes you have to give up your life to save it.

Edward Hadas is a Research Fellow at the Las Casas Institute at Blackfriars Oxford. His book on Catholic Social Teaching, Counsels of Imperfection was published by Catholic University of America Press in 2020.

