

The Gift of Ruling: Secularization and Political Authority

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Today, it seems, all the ancient global realities have fallen under a kind of secular last judgement, heralded by the onset of a secular Armageddon. What is Islam and is it violent and intolerant? What is Catholicism and is it sexually hypocritical and sadistic? What is Christianity and is it an irrational sect? What is Europe, and is it inherently bureaucratic and decadent? What is America and is it inherently violent and expansionist? What is the West and is it inherently greedy and imperialist?

In the midst of all this questioning, though, rather strangely, we do not seem to question the abstract ideas carried by the Western instances amongst these ancient realities. We still seem to believe in what we have transported, if not very much in the modes of transport. Thus we do not often question the ideas of liberal democracy or of human rights, but assume rather that the actual collective realities that we have inherited may now be, in various ways, threatening the instantiation and further extension of these ideals. In the United States, many people lament the apparent start of a transformation of republic into empire and of democracy into the rule of manipulative elites. Less often do they ask whether the American modes of republic and democracy have of their very nature always nurtured both imperialism and oligarchy.

Rather, the story we tell ourselves is that since 1945 and even more since 1990, the dark demons of the past have been put to rout. Now, however, they are returning in the form of fundamentalist religion which is producing both a dangerous mutation in Islam and a dangerous mutation in American conservatism. Once more, irrationalism is asserting itself. We should not be surprised: humans have always been massively prone to superstition, and enlightenment is history's late and most fragile bloom. Once again we must be vigilant – although the rationally illumined divide as they have done ever since the 18th century between advocacy of a vigilance through intensified deployment of regulatory economic and legal institutions (the Franco-German way) or else a military heroism whose ancient spirit liberalism must somehow keep alive against its own deepest inclinations (the new American way, much inspired by Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt).

I do not believe this relatively comforting story. I do not want to deny that all our major inherited collective realities deserve to come up for judgement. They do. But I want to argue that that which seems above reproach, namely liberal democracy, should now most of all come under our judging scrutiny.

Let us ask, first of all, why the West gave birth to liberalism? Not why the West and nowhere else, because this assumes that it was likely to arrive everywhere sooner or later. Rather we should ask why the West gave birth to anything so fantastically peculiar and unlikely. Liberalism is peculiar and unlikely because it proceeds by inventing a wholly artificial human being who has never really existed, and then pretending that we are all instances of such a species. This is the pure individual, thought of in abstraction from his or her gender, birth, associations, beliefs and also, crucially, in equal abstraction from the religious or philosophical beliefs of the observer of this individual as to whether he is a creature made by God, or only material, or naturally evolved and so forth. Such an individual is not only asocial, he is also apsychological; his soul is in every way unspecified. To this blank entity one attaches 'rights', which may be rights to freedom from fear, or from material want. However, real historical individuals include heroes and ascetics, so even these attributions seem too substantive. The pure liberal individual, as Rousseau and Kant finally concluded, is rather the possessor of a free will. Not a will determined to a good or even open to choosing this or that, but a will to will. The pure 'nature' of this individual is his capacity to break with any given nature, even to will against himself. Liberalism then imagines all social order to be either an artifice, the result of various contracts made between such individuals considered in the abstract (Hobbes and Locke) or else as the effect of the way such individuals through their imaginations fantastically project themselves into each other's lives (roughly the view of the Scottish Enlightenment).

Why did thinkers in the West, from Machiavelli, through Hobbes and Locke to Montesquieu, embark on such a seemingly unreal approach to human association? According to Pierre Manent, the French Catholic liberal political thinker, this was because of the so-called 'Theologico-Political problem' bequeathed to it by Christianity.¹ The western Middle Ages inherited from Plato, Aristotle and Cicero the idea that political life is natural, and that a civilized political life most of all fulfils human practical nature when we participate in the political process, make friends amongst the like-minded, and achieve a balanced economic independence exercised by magnanimity towards others. The high-born man in the city is a

¹ Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), Chapter I 'Europe and the Theologico-Political Problem,' 3–10.

respected owner, only in so far as he is a judicious and generous giver. Christianity, however, posited above this natural political goal for human beings a supernatural end: for the righteous the life of heaven and the vision of God face to face. According to Manent these two goals, natural and supernatural, came into conflict in three different ways. First of all, Christianity was relatively indifferent to the mode of secular political order and its dignity: its job was simply the disciplining of sin and the ordering of things destined to pass away. Secondly, however, in a countervailing tendency, the superiority of the supernatural order could be used to justify interventions of the Church in secular rule and indeed the doctrine of the *plenitudo potestatis* of the Pope legitimated a final overruling of kings in all matters and in all circumstances – even if before 1300 or so, this overruling was not deemed to be coercive and was not founded on a Papal claim to eminent *dominium* even over material things, after 1300 even these claims were made by some.²

Thirdly, in Manent's opinion magnanimity and humility could not sit easily together: western Christendom was divided in its admiration both for the prideful hero and the self-abnegating saint.³

On this view then, there was nothing stable about Medieval order. Kingdoms and city states, the realms of feudal warfare and trade, were always champing at the bit, searching for more secular pasturage. However, nearly everyone remained Christian; they accepted the superiority of the supernatural, and therefore could not simply reassert the autonomy of politics from theological considerations and ecclesiastical control, without seeming to revert to paganism. Although pagan political participation, heroism, friendship and magnanimity were still affirmed, they were considered, following Augustine, but 'glittering vices' if not informed by supernatural humility, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, faith, hope and charity.

This appears to leave the secular nowhere to go if it wishes to expand its breathing space: neither the order of nature, nor the order of grace. It is just for this reason, according to Manent, that it was therefore forced to invent a third, artificial realm, built on a consideration not of humanity as it really is, nor as it might ideally become, but rather as it most generally and abstractedly and minimally might be considered. In this way no rival *ideal* to Christianity was proposed, even if an amoral nonevaluative rival to traditional theological reflection was nonetheless put forward. Henceforward the

² See Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100–1625* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 231–40; 362–387; Henri de Lubac, 'L'autorité de L'Eglise en matière temporelle' and 'Augustinisme Politique?' in *Théologies d'Occasion* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 217–40).

³ Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), 25, 200–1.

realm of politics was thought of not as the realisation of a natural *telos*, nor as the abetting of a supernatural one, but simply as the most efficient co-ordination of competing wills, and their summation into one common, powerful collective will. From a theological point of view, this meant that the human individual was not here thought of as a creature, as a divine gift, as defined by his sharing-in and reflection-of, divine qualities of intellect, goodness and glory, but rather as a bare being, existing univocally no more and no less than God himself taken as an abstract possibility and not as the creator. The only thing that now distinguished this bare existence from a blade of grass or an asteroid, was its reflexive capacity for self-moving: its will, which might be equally for good or for evil.

Such a choice was now politically irrelevant. Or rather, as Manent says, if anything there was, from Machiavelli through Hobbes to Montesquieu and Hegel, a bias towards the primacy of evil.⁴ Respect for the good was now seen as the everyday unexceptional reality, but no longer as the normative defining one: that rather belonged to the exceptional suspension of normality in the moment of crisis that reveals a deeper truth and on that basis makes founding civil gestures. This truth emerges in circumstances of pure anarchy and of threat to the city or its rulers: then evil assumes priority precisely in the face of violence. All lies, subterfuges and resorts to counter-violence then become justified. Manent is the only liberal I have read who admits that liberalism is at bottom Sadeian and Satanic. (This seems strange for a Catholic, but then sometimes in French Catholicism a Catharist streak still lurks. . .)

What is impressive in Manent's genealogy is his insistence on the *contingency* of western liberalism. Even though he is a liberal, liberalism is not for him the sane, common-sense residue that remains once one has sloughed off gothic superstitions. Instead it is rather shaped by the Christian gothic crisis, and therefore remains perpetually haunted by it.

Nonetheless, I believe that he does not push this approach far enough. The odd thing about all his writings is that though his central theses revolve around religion and theology he says very little about either. In particular, his treatment of the Middle Ages is cursory and I would argue in some crucial ways inaccurate. Let us examine the three aspects of his theologico-political crisis.

The first two concern tensions between the natural and supernatural ends. Here Manent associates attempts to merge the two with the Baroque, whereas to the contrary, if certainly the Baroque sometimes attempted this, it was only trying to heal its own, not a medieval wound. Overwhelmingly the research of historical theology

⁴ *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, Chapter 11, 'Machiavelli and the Fecundity of Evil', 10–20.

in the 20th century showed that the Middle Ages did not tend to recognize a natural end that was actually, as opposed to formally, independent of the supernatural one. In political terms this means that Manent wholly overstates ecclesiastical indifference to the modes of secular rule: if permitted political forms within Christendom might be either aristocratic or monarchic with a certain indifference according to relatively democratic circumstance, then this was true of pagan thought also. But there was no indifference to the substantive exercise of justice, or a 'Lutheran' tolerance of any enforced peace so long as it was formally peace. Manent is on far surer ground when he stresses the perpetual interference of the supernatural claims in those of the natural: from Augustine onwards, the Church showed a desire to infuse secular practices of warfare, punishment, trade and feudal tenure with the exercise of mercy and forbearance. Even in relation to the function of doing justice, it is arguable that Christianity had an innovative impact: Oliver O'Donovan plausibly contends that St. Paul for the first time made *judgement* (the provision of equity) the sole legitimating ground of government and no longer also the guarding of a terrain, which paganism had always included. This renders rule purely active and donative rather than reactive and defensive. (Another way in which Paul is more Nietzschean than Nietzsche.) And if Christianity asked the State to attend more closely to mercy and justice, inversely its own 'household' communities from the outset took over in part from the *polis* the 'political' function of *paideia*: training in ultimate virtues.⁵ Moreover, salvation itself was not simply an individual matter in the Patristic and Medieval period: redemptive charity, for example, was a state pertaining *between* people, not simply a virtue exercised by an individual. The Church itself was a complex multiple society and not simply the administrative machinery for the saving of souls which it later tended to evolve into. Hence to speak of 'secular' and 'sacred' concerns in this period can be to overlook the fact that monasteries were also farms, that the Church saw to the upkeep of bridges which were at once crossing places and shrines to the Virgin and that the laity often exercised economic, charitable and festive functions in confraternities that were themselves units of the Church as much as parishes, and therefore occupied no unambiguously 'secular' space. Indeed the first freely-shaped voluntary associations in the Christian West tended to be religious ones: the various religious and lay orders did not see constitution-making (any more than canon law itself) as at variance with the idea that the constituted body was itself a divinely instituted gift

⁵ O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 1–228; Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193–285. For the point about St. Paul and ruling by judgement alone, see 148. For the *oikos* and *paideia*, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 399.

and event of grace. Hence while indeed it is true that Christianity, unlike Judaism and Islam, enforces no detailed religious law, and even instils a 'law of charity' beyond legality as command and restriction, this did not so clearly open up the space of the secular as is often thought. For the greater free play given to human social inventiveness opened by the displacing of the notion of divine law from the centre of religious consciousness applied also or more within the religious sphere than within the sphere of worldly rule. In the latter case, Christianity more positioned what it regarded as the regrettably necessary use of coercion outside the redemptive sphere, yet even this was relative and qualified by degrees – the Church also directly exercised some coercion, while the theological warrant for its just exercise even in secular instances was finally assistance to redemptive processes. Moreover, if the *sacerdotium* could also be coercive, the *regnum* could also exercise a positive pastoral concern in the material sphere, for the *regnum* fell at least half within the *ecclesia*.⁶

One should remember too that the supreme laymen, namely kings, were anointed, and assumed that they had thereby received a Christic office in another aspect to that received by the priesthood: Christ being understood following the New Testament as fulfilling the offices of prophet, priest and king.⁷

So to speak of the secular in the Middle Ages can be problematic. For this period the *Saeculum* was not a space but the time before the eschaton: certainly some concerns that were more worldly belonged more to this time, but this did not imply quite our sense of sheer 'indifference' and 'neutrality' as concerns religious matters when we speak of 'the secular.' Indeed one can go further: 'temporal' concerns existed in ontological contrast to eternal ones, but both were 'religious' as falling under divine judgement. Manent writes too much as if the secular *in our sense* was frustrated during the Middle Ages, perpetually struggling to express itself, just waiting for the right language. But surely his own insights show that there is no secular in our sense outside liberalism, and that therefore before the invention of this discourse, there was nothing waiting to be articulated.⁸ (The same point applies to the question of 'religious tolerance.' Again this was not something 'frustrated' in the Middle Ages, since it was as yet inconceivable as compatible with social and political order. Apart from Judaism – in which Christendom, like Islam, saw a complex and unique case – there were no other religious points of view seeking

⁶ For a synthesis of research on this question, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 140–58.

⁷ See O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 169–231; Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997), 42–273.

⁸ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 9–27.

expression. Heresies were the work of minorities themselves seeking hegemony, and the forms they took often – as with Catharism – appeared to threaten not simply the Church’s authority, but the sanctity of the body, the significance of our compromised life in time, the offer of salvation to all and the general mediation of the sacred in nature, image, word and event.)

A direct way to instance this issue is Manent’s example of the Italian city republic. He simply takes it for granted that they were always somewhat secular, neo-pagan realities, trying to escape church control because overwhelmingly preoccupied with the secular business of manufacture, trade, politics and warfare. However, recent research (for example, by Augustine Thompson OP) utterly belies this: the earlier Italian republics were not founded on pagan models, but were more like ‘confraternities of confraternities’; citizenship was liturgically linked to baptism (as the free-standing baptisteries of Italian cities still attest today) and participation in local church and civic life (often astonishingly and directly democratic in character) were so complexly interwoven as to be inseparable. Suspicion of the Pope and even of the clergy does not here amount to ‘secularity’ as Manent’s modern conservative French piety appears to assume. Moreover, the emergence of a more pagan republicanism with Machiavelli coincided with an evolution of the city-states towards principdoms and local imperialism.⁹

We are starting then to see that liberalism is yet *more* contingent than Manent allows. It is not so clear after all that the Middle Ages contained an entirely irresolvable tension. If it had done, one must then ask: why should *not* it have been possible to re-assert the independence of pagan virtue? Manent’s claim that this was impossible seems actually to concede that there was no real notion at this time of an entirely independent natural end. Besides, it is clear that some thinkers, notably Dante, did try to make this assertion. One can say perhaps that the attempt failed, but if it did then again this was because the notion of a substantive natural end valid in its own right could not yet easily find favour. (And one should also add that, as Dante’s case shows, even such a purely natural end remained ‘religious’).¹⁰

Finally, Manent can only insist on the incompatibility between magnanimity and humility by explicitly denying Aquinas’s own opinion to the contrary.¹¹ In effect, Manent says that Christian virtue is the abject reception of divine gift; Aquinas, by contrast, says that we should recognize greatness of soul as the crucial divine gift – our

⁹ *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 5–7; Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125–1325* (Penn State, PA: Penn State U.P. forthcoming).

¹⁰ Dante, *Monarchy*, ed. Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), esp. III xvi, pp. 91–94.

¹¹ *The City of Man*, 200–1; S.T. II II Q. 129 a3 ad 4; Q 161 a1.

sharing in God's generous rule. In possession of magnanimity, a man may even 'deem himself worthy of great things', but only 'in consideration of the gifts he holds from God'. For ourselves, nevertheless, in humble consideration of our weakness we should not boast, because we are deluded if we think we are sure of the range of our powers or their stability. We should rather more strongly acknowledge magnanimity in others and its source in God, since we are its beneficiaries – since it helps to mediate divine grace to us. Aquinas therefore sees no problem in the Christianization of the notion of a governing and generous dispersal. If he does qualify the goodness of magnanimity, it is more in terms of charity than of humility: supreme ethical virtue is now not to be independent of the help and assistance of others (as Manent to be fair, also notes, yet strangely fails to link to charity as friendship) and so friendship no longer ornaments magnanimity. Rather magnanimity promotes friendship.¹² So it is less that supernatural humility and natural magnanimity are in tension for Aquinas, as that supernatural charity elevates and perfects natural (Aristotelian) friendship, stressing more its mutuality and its scope – downwards beneath humanity and upwards beyond him to God. (It is clear from the example of St. Francis and others that a new stress on 'befriending creatures' was itself allied to transformed social practices.)

Within these perspectives, the invention of liberalism appears still more of a mystery. What can one suggest instead of Manent's thesis or rather in modification of it? First of all, one should take more seriously Charles Péguy's view, which Manent mentions, that despite the bridges and the confraternities, the orders of chivalry and the at times semi-baptised cults of erotic love, the Medieval church did not *adequately* incarnate Christianity in the lay and material orders. Lay paths to salvation were seen as more perilous than clerical ones; increasingly the laity were removed (often understandably in the name of anti-corruption, yet still with exclusive effect) from influence over specifically clerical and sacramental matters. It never quite worked out how, if contemplation is the highest end of human life, then leisure could be 'the basis of culture' for every individual as well as for the whole of society. Nor did it question a theory/practice duality or come to the realization that work also can be contemplative. This was also a failure to grasp adequately its *own* reality; it took Chateaubriand, Hugo, Pugin and Ruskin in the 19th century to point out that medieval contemplation was also the work of the church masons, the composers and the poets. One can sum this up by saying that the Middle Ages never quite understood that if liturgy stands at the summit then this is at once a humanly crafted work (involving in the end all of society, lay and clerical) and a divinely received gift; here we both shape and see.

¹² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 359–62; ST II. II. Q8 a1; Q23 aa 1–7.

Thus Christianity, one could argue beyond Manent, was not inherently prone to duality; rather its contingent modes of clerical development encouraged such duality.

A second point is linked to the first one. The more the clergy tended to see themselves as specialists in salvation and sacramental mediation, then the more the mediation of the transcendent by symbols, by nature, by society and by reason, was played down. Instead, the resources of scripture, tradition, hierarchy, sign and sacrament started to be viewed as so many positive, given, revealed facts. In this perspective the clergy became like shadows of the wielders of physical force – they were now the quasi-literal exponents of quasi-literal circumstances.¹³ This attitude went along with a new theology which stressed the inscrutability of the divine will. This was still a giving, generous will, but the gifts of material well-being or of salvation now tended less to be seen as disclosing to us the very inner-life of the Trinity. In consequence, life on earth and the process of salvation started less to be seen as an entering into this Trinitarian life.¹⁴

I think that in our current circumstances, it is here important not to overlook the fact that these new developments involved certain echoes of Medieval Islam – even when paradoxically the aim was to escape just this influence. First of all, the tension between revealed word and Greek reason was far greater in Islam, which never arrived at the kind of synthesis achieved by Aquinas: indeed, the latter, like most thinkers in the Latin West, *never* saw himself as a philosopher in the way the great Arabic developers of Aristotle and neoplatonism did. Secondly, the Islamic world tended to resolve this tension in the political world by minimizing the role of natural equity: the Caliph's inscrutable word was law because he had been appointed by the inscrutable command of Allah. This voluntarist approach to political rule later became dominant in the West also, wherein it encouraged first papal and later royal absolutism.

It may seem to us that absolutism and liberalism are opposites, but in fact they spring from the same root, since they both have to do with the primacy of the will. In the early modern West, the competition of individual wills was only resolved by investing all political rule for the first time in a single sovereign will. This applies whether or not this will was seen as ruling by divine right or by contract or both, and whether it was seen as the will of the king or as the democratic will of the people. If this entire tendency both echoes Islam and foreshadows enlightenment, than that is less surprising when one remembers that Islam saw itself as a more final religion than Christianity, since it is

¹³ De Lubac, *op. cit.* (note 2 above); John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 105.

¹⁴ See Pickstock, *After Writing*, 121–40.

more manifestly a universal monotheism, purged of the mysterious, mystical and unfathomable (Trinity and Incarnation) and reinstating the practical order of law beyond the anarchy of love. A rational as well as pious stress on unity paradoxically promoted the arbitrariness of a willing source – since this is one of the strongest paradigms of unity – all the way from Mohammed to Montesquieu. Hence the whole line of thought which goes ‘Islam needs the enlightenment which Christendom has passed through’ is somewhat shallow. In a certain sense one can say that, while Islam failed to engage with the Christian other and went into a decline, Christianity *did* engage with the Islamic other with multiple consequences and *even the enlightenment* (think of deism) is in some degree an upshot of a subtle ‘Islamification’. (Certain *philosophes* spasmodically admired Islamic despots, just as they did the greater ‘rationality’ of both Islam and Judaism.)¹⁵

So although Manent is right to stress the importance for liberalism of Machiavelli’s neo-pagan cult of heroic virtue and the free but mortally-doomed republic, he is wrong to ignore additional ecclesiastical and theological roots of liberalism. Even though the latter eventually enshrines secularity, the invention of an autonomous secular realm is perhaps mainly the paradoxical work of a certain kind of theology. This theology tends to lose sight of the fact that created being is only a gift; only exists as *sharing* in divine existence and as perpetually *borrowing* this existence. Instead, God is now idolatrously regarded as a kind of very big literal fact, who established other facts alongside himself and grants to these facts certain autonomies, certain areas of purely free decision – like a government decreeing that ‘normally’ police cannot enter a private house or say what should go on there. (The qualifier ‘normally’ being also relevant to the nature of that kind of theology.) The same norms of non-interference now pertain between individuals: already Duns Scotus substituted for the ‘common good’ contractually-agreed upon conventions as sufficiently guaranteeing the civil peace.¹⁶

So liberalism is not witness to a kind of tragic truth or fantasized Manichean Christianity. Instead it witnesses the failure of the Church regarding the laity and the growth of a somewhat positivist and formalist theology of divine power which itself helped to invent

¹⁵ See O’Donovan and O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 423–476; 517–30; Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9–27; John Neville Figgis, *From Gerson to Grotius, 1414–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907); *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914). And see Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, ed. Jean Goldzink (Paris: PUF, 1989) where he displays a certain fascination for the absolutism of the seraglio. The *Encyclopédie* speaks of Islam as a more rational faith, though Voltaire eventually came to see it as intrinsically despotic. I am grateful for discussions with David Hart here.

¹⁶ See Isiduro G. Manzano O.F.M., ‘Individuo y Sociedad en Duns Escoto’ in *Antoniano*, Jan.–March 2001 LXXVI, fasc. I, pp. 43–79.

liberalism. Manent significantly ignores the echo of this theology in Hobbes and Locke who were by no means yet purely secular thinkers, but more like Christian heresiarchs.¹⁷

But what is wrong with the liberalism which this theology engendered? Here I have nothing to add to the profundity of Manent, the chastened liberal.¹⁸ With Manent let us note the following: Liberalism assumes the greater reality of evil over good; liberalism begins by suppressing the soul, or rather by assuming a gross psychology largely for the sake of administrative convenience. Liberalism, as the liberals Rousseau, Constant and Tocqueville further diagnosed, in practice bifurcates the soul, by ensuring that it must submit to a tyranny of mere opinion, given that no opinion is for liberalism inherently right or wrong. As a result, it is perpetually swayed away from its 'own' opinion which remains elusive. Furthermore, as Montesquieu gleefully pointed out, under liberalism, since only what is generally represented is publicly valid, the spectacle of representing always dominates the supposedly represented people, ensuring that what they think is always already just what they are represented as thinking. Thus Tocqueville noted that in America, the freest society on earth, there is least of all public debate, and most of all tyranny of general mass opinion.¹⁹ Instead of debate, as Manent also points out, one has *competition*, not just in the economic realm but in the

¹⁷ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, op. cit.

¹⁸ See *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, Chapters III-X, and conclusion, pp. 20–119; *The City of Man*, esp. Part Two, 111207; *Modern Liberty and its Discontents*, ed. Daniel J. Maloney and Paul Seaton (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 79–117, 197–231.

¹⁹ Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 65–119. Manent disallows that Rousseau is a liberal, since he seeks, albeit within modern, liberal terms, once again a mode of the positive liberty of the ancients, a coincidence of individual with civic virtue. However, the coincidence, whereby the liberty of each would be immediately the liberty of all, is still put forward by Rousseau in terms of modern negative liberty of pure choice and survival, whether of the city or the individual. Certainly Manent admits that Rousseau and Marx after him were trying to resolve the *aporia* of liberalism – which comes first, represented civil society, or the representing state? – and to this extent their 'ideological' excesses were the consequences of liberal presuppositions. Yet because, at the limit, he himself accepts these presuppositions, Rousseau and Marx became for him non-liberals by virtue of their continued quest for antique *sittlichkeit* in modern guise. Yet if this quest leads logically to terror (and one can agree with Manent it does) and the problem is the perverted hybrid of liberalism with *sittlichkeit*, then the fault may lie with the impossibility of positive liberty in modern circumstances, or it may lie with liberalism itself, since an aporetic reality must periodically (or even ceaselessly) seek to resolve the dilemmas it generates. The latter view appears more logical, and on this understanding Rousseau and Marx represent part of the inevitable continuum of liberal philosophy. Manent's own Straussian perspective, which appears to combine a tragic recognition of the truth but impossibility of antique virtue, with a resignation to liberal aporias, appears every bit as 'postmodern' as the views of the *soixante-huitardes* he would reject, since he is resigned to a kind of endless undecidability. But if this is indeed the end of history, it will always generate new perturbations beyond this end, and new post-liberal terrorisms. For Montesquieu, see *An Intellectual History*, 53–65; for Tocqueville, *An Intellectual History*, 103–14 and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 235.

cultural realm also. In the absence of collective standards, or even a collective search for standards, the only standard is a regulated *agon* according to formalised procedures.

Beneath all of these woes of liberalism lurks one fundamental point: it lacks any extra-human or any extra-natural norm, and this ensures that it revolves in an empty circle. As Manent says, for liberalism it is nature alone that *gives* although she cannot command, cannot authorize, before the arrival of the State. Inversely, the sovereign State, or the effectively sovereign free market, can alone command, but it does not give: it only lays down boundaries or offers products or opportunities. Apparently it does not *force* us, but equally by the same token it *provides* us with nothing. The State legislates, the market exchanges on behalf of human nature which it represents, yet without the State or market this human nature is not really *entitled* to be represented. Therefore representing and represented compose an empty hall of mirrors: in the middle, the soul of humanity is no longer there where we suppose it to be. And since there are no more souls with intrinsic destinies and purposes, no *projects* can be allowed: opinions cannot be permitted any influence. In theory the Church can offer to people its rule of charity and reconciliation; in practice its scope for doing so is limited by the sovereign State. If, for example, the citizens of New York chose to run their city according to that liturgical order which its gothic skyscrapers so strangely intimate (indeed Manhattan constitutes one gigantic cathedral-castle) with a third of the days off a year for worship and feasting, neither State nor market would permit this. Liberalism allows apparent total diversity of choice; at the same time it is really a formal conspiracy to ensure that no choice can ever be significantly effective. Already Tocqueville noted that in the United States nothing really happens; its apparent dynamism conceals an extraordinary stasis. (And if change does occur, Americans tend quickly to deny that anything was ever any different; today, for example, if shops in the U.S.A. cease to stock a product, they will often deny that they ever *have* stocked it.)

Without souls or purposes, equally victim to mass manipulation, there is no longer anything for people to share. Under liberalism we no longer really meet each other; establish connections yes, truly make friends, almost never. There is no longer anyone to be friends with, as a hundred novelists have told us. Removed from society and friendship, liberal man focuses like Locke's Adam on dominating nature. But even here he does not escape empty circularity. His business with nature is to be guided by nature, by an accurate science of nature; this, however, is always incomplete, so he fantasises complete stories of evolutionary genetics whose real truth is the undergirding of unlimited programmes for self-alteration and the commodification of the biosphere. But even were the full story

apparently known, how would the fact of evolutionary drift tell him how to modify himself, and how would he be sure this was a pure goal-less drift unless a legitimation of random modification, obedient only to choice, was just what he secretly sought out?

Manent, like many others, contrasts these phenomena with the antique pursuit of natural virtue, but he also contrasts them with the Augustinian idea of the rule of grace. Grace itself, for Augustine in the *Confessions*, was at once gift and rule: it ‘orders what it gives, gives what it orders’. But just as the market divides purely contracted exchange from the realm of the free-giving that expects no return, so also the liberal state sunders ruling which gives nothing, but formally and disinterestedly mediates, from a free giving which can no longer command the other. Thereby though, both rule and gift are, from a Christian point of view, denatured. ‘Rule’, means for theology, ‘provide good order’ and so to give something. Indeed for Augustine and Aquinas it means to give ruling itself – to give a share in ruling. When my mind rules my body, my body acquires the habit of self-control, so body also commands body. Similarly, political rule is for Aquinas *communication*, an imparting of power which must take place if it can, else power falsely reserved will fester.²⁰ This means that every time one rules, one *loses* ruling in part, except in the sense of fully retaining the capacity for ruling, or even increasing it through its very exercise. Even in the case of God he loses no rule because in utterly sharing it, he is sharing ruling, which is in itself a mode of sharing. Thus God the supreme ruler is within himself an imparting of the *Verbum* and *Donum*. But liberal sovereignty is not like this: because it gives nothing, it entirely reserves all power to itself as a sinister stagnant pond of pointless possibilities.

One can see the contrast by a brief illustration. Prior to 1548, the kings of France gave privileges of trade and manufacture to the city of Lyon after visiting it and first receiving tributes of presents and pageants from the city. The king, though superior, thereby acknowledged Lyon’s share in his ruling; hence when he delegated ruling power to the city he appropriately received something back from it. The rule of the traditional anointed king was therefore not just a giving, it could even be exercised as a mode of gift-*exchange*, in which to some extent the city obligated the monarch. But in the year 1548, Henry II decided that the partying had to stop: he stayed in Paris, received nothing and merely issued the privileges as written

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Impugnantes*, I cap 4 para 14. Here he cites Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*: ‘Everything that is not lessened by being imparted, is not, if it be possessed without being communicated, possessed as it ought to be possessed’. Russell Hittenger notes that Aquinas always mirrors ‘every analogous use of the word *societas* by uses of the word *communicatio*: *communicatio oeconomica*, *communicatio spiritualis*, *communicatio civilis*, and so forth’ – see his unpublished article, ‘The *Munus Regale* in John Paul II’s Political Theology’, p. 24.

documents. Lyon understood that what it had received it might also not have received, that it was no longer ruled, but commanded – that what it had received were no longer gifts but devices of state policy, manipulated by murderous *politiques*.²¹

In such modes the traditional ruler shared his sovereignty and thereby ruled. His sovereignty – whether that of Medieval kings or Roman senators – was not just a lone impotent word prior to action; it was also already an action: the king really went to Lyon. In this way the sovereign was always already an executive. The executive forces that existed apart from him were multiple and beneath him, mediating his crowned rule. But under fully developed liberalism, starting with Montesquieu, the sovereign is apparently qualified at the centre by the independent executive.²² Is this really wise and benign? Not entirely; in some ways it is highly sinister. For the fact that the executive is now at the centre confirms and does *not* qualify the monopoly of sovereign power at the centre. For it confirms and further reveals that this sovereign commands and does not truly rule or give. Just because the sovereign word is absolute and empty, speaking only the freedom of the individual and its own freedom, none of its words *ever mean anything*, and therefore never devolve in action. For precisely this reason, the very sovereignty of the sovereign needs the supplementation of the executive. The latter must both interpret and act, although both aspects are bound in the circumstances to involve a certain individual arbitrariness. For the modern executive does not share in ordering, and therefore what he gives is blind, banal and empty, like a fact or a bare univocal existence.

From the outset – despite the protestations from different political wings of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – the American division of powers was intended to balance out oligarchic forces and limit the power of the masses. The federalists, like Machiavelli, envisaged a republic sustaining its strength and freedom by the muted encouragement of internal agonisms. (For this reason Leo Strauss was wrong in ostensibly regarding the American principle as the opposite of the Machiavellian one, although the current actions of his many students

²¹ See Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth Century France* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 90–95.

²² One can contrast Montesquieu with James Harrington (the cavalier turned republican; never a roundhead) on this point. For Harrington ‘the Senate’ is not a sovereign legislative power sundered from the executive; it is rather an aristocratic assembly of the wise that offers disinterested advice to the sovereign democratic power. But the constitution of the United States was finally based more on Montesquieu than on Harrington. See James Harrington (John Toland?) ‘A System of Politics’ Chap. V, 28–32, esp. 28: ‘If a council capable of debate has also the result, it is oligarchy. If an assembly capable of the result has debate also, it is anarchy. Debate in a council not capable of result, and result in an assembly not capable of debate is democracy’. Hence democracy, as opposed to anarchy, for Harrington/Toland contains an educatively ‘aristocratic’ moment.

now in power suggests that they may have had direct access to one of those opposite esoteric meanings of which he was so fond.)²³ It is not surprising then, that the Republic defined as regulatively free should go on needing external enemies, nor that the sustaining of the internal agonism should seek out endless new frontiers. As with ancient Rome, as Augustine in effect diagnosed, the empire may have corrupted the *republic*, but it was still the republic, with its agonistic and defensive understanding of virtue, that generated the empire. (In any case talk of a specifically ‘republican empire’ has a long pedigree in the United States: for example, in some writings of Walt Whitman).²⁴

I am of course hinting at reasons why liberal democracy, with and not against its own nature, can turn internally oppressive and externally expansionist. But surely I am missing out on a whole dimension here regarding our present global troubles? This is the renewed role of religion. What has that to do with the historical course of liberalism?

Well, here again Manent is of considerable help. He argues, as we have seen, that liberals themselves have sooner or later become aware of the empty ‘hall of mirrors’ factor that I have invoked. He gives the crucial example of the period in French thought after the French Revolution and before 1848. Suddenly, in that period, *all* political thought – conservative, liberal and now socialist – became obsessively *religious* in one way or another.²⁵ Why this break with 18th century norms? Manent argues that once Rousseau had defined the liberal individual as pure will, it became clear that this will is in excess either

²³ See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 192–3 and Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and the search for a postliberal order* (Kansas City: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 160–1. See also Seymour M. Hersch’s ‘Annals of National Security’ column in *The New Yorker* for May 12, 2003, ‘Selective Intelligence: How the Pentagon Outwitted the CIA,’ 44–52. Hersch points out that many of the neo-conservative ‘cabal’ who have set up their own intelligence network – Abram Schutz, Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol and Stephen Cantone, are Strauss’s pupils and that Schutz together with Gary Schmitt had already developed in print a ‘Straussian’ approach to intelligence gathering, which of course stressed that there are always more hidden secrets than one imagines. These are the very people who overrode the professional expertise of the CIA and the DIA to insist that Iraq had massive concealed stores of Weapons of Mass Destruction! Pointing out the predominance of German and German-Jewish names here is surely not racist, but rather a necessary indication of profoundly terrible and tragic historical ironies at work. Strauss was a German Jew who fled Hitler, yet his heirs along with many others have helped to insinuate an element of Germanic authoritarianism and paranoia at the heart of an Anglo-Saxon polity. Nor has Israel – perhaps from the outset – escaped this taint. Meanwhile a chastened Germany now has much politically to teach the Anglo-Saxon world...

²⁴ See David Brooks’ article on Whitman’s essay ‘Democratic Vistas’ in *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003, pp. 32–33. Brooks cites Whitman: ‘So will individuality, and unimpeded branchings, flourish best under imperial republican forms’. Brooks appears however – like increasingly many left of centre supporters of the U.S. Democratic Party – unperturbed by this sort of rhetoric.

²⁵ *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 80–114. See also Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 66–71, 196–203, 408.

of the economic market (civil society) or the sovereign political state, precisely because these two will nothing, or else will each other in a futile circle. Suddenly what Rousseau's 'general will' willed became the nation, history, society or culture. Because there was a certain new realisation (especially in Tocqueville – and there are British and German parallels to this) that politics could not be *about* anything without the recognition of superhuman norms, the nation, history, etc. started to be imbued with quasi-religious values. These were brutally deconstructed much later by Charles Péguy – who showed, for example, that the historical point of view suppresses the inexplicability (beyond a certain point) of every historical event by fantasizing an exhaustive circumstantial or causal account (one thinks of those admirable 1,000 page *Annales* volumes ultimately inspired by Michelet whom Péguy partially had in mind) which idolatrously seems to mimic the mind of God. Likewise, Péguy saw that the very idea of sociology supposed that one had fantasized a kind of eternal normative society which displaced the function of God himself.²⁶

Manent follows Péguy in dismissing the 'quasi-religions' of historicism, sociology, *Bildung* and national development. However, his assumptions regarding the supposed Christian dilemma, means that like Leo Strauss (who is a strong influence) but for somewhat different reasons, he continues to espouse both political liberalism and political economy as better than any possible alternative, even though, again as with Strauss, the antique *polis* with an élite in charge remains for him the irreplaceable guide to genuine human nature. To both Strauss and Manent one can here validly pose the question: does not this mean that one requires *slavery* (at least in some form) to reveal true human nature and sustain the pursuit of real excellence, not negative freedom alone? (And this may well be another esoteric view covertly entertained by the scions of the neo-Roman empire, north as well as south of the Potomac.) And why is a more widely dispersed pursuit of excellence not in principle possible? Why outside the sheltered bubble of the American campus is resignation to the mass pursuit of only negative freedom inevitable?

In addition, one can point out that, while Manent is refusing the quasi-religions of sociology and historicism, he is still embracing the quasi-religions of the Machiavellian Hobbesian republic and the Hobbesian-Lockean translation of theological voluntarism. By contrast, the new early 19th century attention to society, history and culture sometimes – as with Coleridge, the Oxford Movement, the Catholic Tübingen School, Chateaubriand, Lamennais and Ballanche

²⁶ Pierre Manent, 'Charles Péguy: Between Political Faith and Faith' in *Modern Liberty and its Discontents*, 79–81. And see Romain Rolland, *Péguy* tome I (Paris: Albin Michel, 1944), 137–9, 309.

in France and the French and English Christian socialists (Pierre Buchez, Ludlow, Ruskin, Thomas Hancock) involved a genuine recovery of Christianity which newly stressed both its links to poetic, not literal language, and the Patristic idea of the Church as a new kind of society.²⁷ These efforts were taken up again by Péguy, and setting to one side his often unjustifiable nationalism, it is hard to agree with Manent that he is *confusing* the mystical with the political. To the contrary, Manent is here misled by his own failure to see how grace in the Middle Ages already sought to sanctify the material realm; hence, he also fails to see that much 19th century neo-gothicism tried to take this process further. Christianity has gradually redefined virtue as existing primarily in the charitable exchange of gift throughout the cosmos and human society and between the creation and its maker. In this way the invocation of grace has democratized virtue and suggested a deepening embodiment of this virtue in the social order as a truly Christian project. Indeed without such an embodying, how can day-to-day life perpetually raise us up into the supernatural?

Already in the Middle Ages John Wyclif had said that, since God is One, *whenever* he gives his natural gifts, he also gives us his supernatural gift.²⁸ Wyclif, building on the more valid aspects of the Franciscan vision, thereby suggested that all ownership and rule is by grace (by borrowing from God) and that the justification of both property and government is communicative distribution: just as the priest receives the gift of dispensing the sacrament in order to induct others into the *common* life of grace, so also the property owner owns in order to induct others into the common material life and the ruler rules in order to induct others into the shared life of society.²⁹ This was a valid radicalisation of Augustine, and it was a pity that Wyclif's Franciscan separation of 'spiritual' ownership of the life of interior grace from material *dominium*, re-instituted a duality which his theory of *dominium* by grace tended to negate. Because of this duality he was led into a doubtful Erastianism which disallowed any actual material ownership to the Church.

²⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 66–71, 196–203, 408; Alexander Dru, *The Church in the Nineteenth Century: Germany 1800–1918* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963). One can also note here that Augustine's new definition of a *res publica* as foregathered around the object of its desire already tends to make the political a sub-category of the social: see *Theology and Social Theory*, 400–401.

²⁸ John Wyclif, 'Civil Lordship' Book I, Chap. 7 15 C in O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, p. 488: 'God gives only in the best way of which the recipient is capable; but every righteous man is capable of the best gift in general; so God bestows only in that way, for as long as one is righteous . . . and so God cannot give a creature any created good without first giving uncreated good'; Chap 716c: 'God gives no gifts to man without giving himself as the principal gift.'

²⁹ Wyclif, 'Divine Lordship Book 3 Chap I 70, Chap 4 78 a in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 487–8.

The same duality sets in motion again the voluntarist logic of the other English Franciscan legacy which Wyclif in general resisted: if the Church is too pure to 'own' things, then owning is thereby downgraded and a drastically secular domain is encouraged.³⁰ By contrast, if owning is by grace, then a just appropriation ought to permit genuine private property which is thereby not impure and can be ascribed (as by Aquinas) to Adam in paradise.³¹ The same consideration applies also to a non-coercive ruling linked to a natural hierarchy of talents: such a rule also could be exercised by the unfallen Adam.

However, the later English thinkers John Fortescue (in the 15th century) and Richard Hooker (in the early 17th century) tended creatively to blend somewhat Wyclif-like notions of owning and ruling by grace and gift-giving, with Thomist notions of natural possession and natural hierarchy. This allowed them further to elaborate Aquinas' own synthesis of Aristotle and Augustine: there is a natural 'ownership' based on use and a 'political government' that existed before the Fall, founded in sociability, differential endowments of ability and consensual association (the 'whig' element that Aquinas already adds to Aristotle). On the other hand, somewhat arbitrary property ownership and 'royal' government are necessities consequent upon the Fall. Nevertheless they are both, for Fortescue and Hooker, founded in natural law, not the *ius gentium*, since they both perpetuate, in straitened circumstances, the pre-lapsarian goals of communication of material goods and the benefits of peaceful order. Likewise, the natural principle of tacit consent is perpetuated in the importance given by both thinkers to 'parliaments, councils and the like assemblies' (Hooker). Here then, a certain line of English political theory linked Germanic common law principles of free association with a Latin and realist sense of intrinsic equity – avoiding the rationalist barbarism of nominalism and voluntarism. This same synthesis (with Thomist input) avoided also the ambiguity of Wyclif's Franciscan-derived spiritualism, along with his drift (albeit less marked than with Ockham) to a notion of subjective not objective right. (This notion in Wyclif is linked to the idea both of a sheerly material pure possession and to a certain Pelagian independently human reception of grace. It is also completely linked to his very-extreme, almost Platonic, mode of realism. Here the shared essence is

³⁰ See the O'Donovans' commentary on Wyclif in *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 482–7 and Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, again on Wyclif at 26, and on the ambivalence of Franciscan poverty at 207. See also on the same subject Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 15–16.

³¹ See Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (Norfolk, VA: IHS Press, 2002). Belloc's distributist notions were clearly of more Dominican than Franciscan inspiration.

so common and hypostasised that it leaves the individual *external* to the essence: so radically free and singular.)³²

Wyclif's notions had politically radical consequences: the heir of a king *not* ruling by giving should be deposed; the heir of a property not dispensing its bounty should be ousted. In this scheme then, there was nothing merely otherworldly about the impact of grace, but these worldly consequences were a logical elaboration of Augustinian principles.

In many ways the 19th century Christian socialists took up again the spirit of Wyclif: but whereas he had spoken of ruling and owning by receiving the divine gift and passing it on, they now spoke also of the *worker* as receiving the gift of craft and passing it on, and furthermore argued that all human ruling, owning, agriculture and trading is a kind of working: not only a receiving of the gift of creation, but an extension of the divine creative process itself.³³ These thematics are in fact supremely well summed up by Péguy.³⁴

But in all this, Manent seems only to discern a contamination of religion with an attempt to fill the empty heart of liberalism with the pseudo-religion of society, history and culture. It is exactly here though that Christian socialism can contest his (very subtle and chastened) Christian liberalism. For if one argues that the Middle Ages already practised and promoted a political rule by giving, a mode of freedom in which one gives what one commands, and commands what one gives, then there was no inherent Christian problem that needed the liberal invention of the empty negative freedom of a mythical individual. Grace *can* validly be incarnated as the exchange of gifts according to a mutual and continuous discovery of what should be given and what should be received. In shaping and constructing new gifts, we constantly re-discern our human teleology; here Manent also fails to see that Christianity

³² See *From Irenaeus to Grotius*, 530–41 and 743–57; On Wyclif and the late post-Ockham Oxford neo-realism, see Alain de Libera, *La Querelle des Universaux: de Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Eds du Seuil, 1996), 402–410. One can sympathize strongly with O'Donovan's predilection for what one might call 'very early modern' conciliar realists: Fortescue, Nicholas of Cusa, Hooker, etc. In their fusion of Ancient natural law and modern constitution-making, they seem to offer an alternative to either the Medieval or the modern. But is it correct to speak as he does of 'early modern liberalism' here, and to assimilate such currents to the undoubted liberalism (founded in subjective rights) of Grotius? In these earlier currents there is no subjective right proceeding primarily from the ground of will in the Hobbesian-Lockean sense, and no social contract in the Hobbesian-Lockean mode of an agreement between previously sovereign individuals and establishing a primarily formal legitimacy. Fortescue's 'mystical "compact"' is rather the issuing of the Aristotelian social impulse at the very 'origin' of any conceivable humanity in the collective enterprise of shaping artificial and historically contingent institutions that nevertheless seek to express a substantive equity.

³³ See *Theology and Social Theory*, 197–200.

³⁴ See Charles Péguy, *Basic Verities*, trans. Ann and Julian Green (London: Kegan Paul), 75–95, 101–119.

had already historicized nature, since the fullness of human nature only arrived with the event of the God-Man and is further unfolded in the life of the Church. Christianity does not inevitably encourage liberal democracy; yet it always should encourage another mode of democracy, linked to the idea of the infallible presence of the Holy Spirit in the whole body of the Church and by extension humanity across all times and places. (Since all human society in some degree foreshadows *ecclesia* and in this way always mediates some supernatural grace.) Unlike liberal democracy, this Christian democracy has a hierarchic dimension: the transmission of the gift of truth across time, and the reservation of a non-democratic educative sphere concerned with finding the truth, not ascertaining majority opinion. Without this sphere, democracy will not be able to debate about the truth, but will always be swayed by propaganda: mass representation will represent only itself not the represented. Christian democracy though, should also be Christian socialism – not the somewhat limited Christian democracy of so-called Christian-Democratic parties. (Or, one can say, it should be ‘Christian social democracy’ and one should add that there can be Jewish and Islamic democracy also and that in many parts of the world – France perhaps imminently – we shall need hybrids. I believe that within the more metaphysically realistic Platonic-Aristotelian and mystical versions of these three monotheisms, a large shared social ground can emerge.) It should not be resigned to the existence of poverty as a field for the reactive exercise of personal charity; instead it should see the eradication of poverty as the chance for the fuller arrival of a festive charitable exchange.

I have been writing intermittently about the nature of the 19th century revival of religion and its links with the dilemmas of liberalism. In the later 19th century though, the quasi-religious nature of this tendency became more marked and one had the paradox of secular religions: notably of positivism and Marxist socialism. In the latter case, Marx perpetuated Rousseau’s attempt to discover something substantive within the immanent terms of liberalism itself: the gap between individual and state could be closed, because the general productive will of all was to be identified with the productive will of each. This, however, elevates the emptiness and purposelessness and illusory transparency of production as such: this general pursuit of production is bound to result in tyranny and is only a variant, after all, of liberal political economy. Positivism was both more honest and more sinister: it promoted at once liberal science and the formal inescapability of the rule of the will, with indifference as to content. Inevitably, positivism mutated into fascism, Nazism and Stalinism (which had a strong component of Georgian fascism: the Georgian *Khvost* carried out a purge of Jews and Leninists and it was Hitler who broke his pact with Stalin, not *vice versa*). These

phenomena were bizarrely both ultra-modern and atavistically mystical. But this contradiction is only the extreme and most telling variant of the attempt to fill the empty heart of liberalism with society, culture, history, etc. It is now an attempt made in strictly immanent terms consistent with liberalism itself: thus the new dark heart espoused is patently arbitrary, even to many of its espousers. If it is a myth to supplement formal emptiness, it is also itself a myth of apocalyptic emptiness – a myth of will, of the will to power, which reaches back into our animality under the banner of race.

Since 1945 and 1990 however, liberal democracy has been restored. So what has happened to the great endeavour from 1800 to 1865 to infuse psychic and bodily content into liberalism's hall of mirrors? The attempt seemed discredited by totalitarianism. This is partly why, since 1970, we have seen the reinstatement of 18th century modes of liberalism, of the pure empty echo-chamber – though it is also in part because the forced submission of capital to the demands of labour was creating a crisis of profitability. But is there any stability here, any Hegelian end of history in liberal mutual recognition of human rights? The answer is no, for several reasons. First of all, between 1945 and 1990 communism still existed. The stability of liberal democracy in the West partly *depended* upon its existence. Why? The answer is that fear of the communist alternative helped to keep capitalism reasonable – it tended to protect both trade union rights and the welfare state. Also it gave to the West a binding purpose: oppose the giganomachy of totalitarian regimes.

After the collapse of communism we had exactly twelve short years of liberal democratic stability. It seems then that it cannot really bear its own hegemony. Without the external state socialist alternative to both modify and negatively define it, the central *aporia* of liberalism tends to reappear: which is primary, the representing state or the represented market? In Europe, once again, the 'middle' of society and history has been re-interpreted, this time as the project of Europe itself, whose nature and fate remain very uncertain. But once more we note a certain neo-gothicism: already Europe has become a bewildering maze of interlocking and overlapping jurisdictions, in some ways once again like Christendom, with a relative disregard for nation-state sovereignty, although the question of its submission to a sovereignty writ large definitely remains. Meanwhile, the United States, which was only ever a *nation* State through racist attempts to invent a 'white' nation, finds its statehood and economic hegemony in dire crisis: undercut by other rising nations or transnational political realities, by international corporations and by those using the free market and freedom of information only to subvert the market and the trade in knowledge. (For example, the U.S. recently stemmed the decline of its manufacturing base by encouragement of the inflow of foreign capital; this, however, has generated a massive

and unprecedented national debt. At the same time, a long-term response to over-production in the face of rival producers overseas has been the diversion of capital into finance; this in turn has caused a 'realisation' crisis – there is too little that one can viably invest in. Both the resisting of creditors and search for new investment fields tends to dictate an imperial solution.)³⁵ The United States' response, perhaps inevitably given its history and the nature of its polity, is to seek to safeguard itself by exporting itself and rendering itself a globally pervasive reality. Here economic, political and symbolic dominance are inseparable. If the increasingly free market is potentially vulnerable to those increasingly disadvantaged by it, then it must be extended everywhere; as it is vulnerable and porous it must also be *politically* imposed everywhere and relentlessly policed. Finally, since neither the market nor policing can suppress opinion and acting on opinion, the American market way of life, the spectacle of its capitalist order, must be ceaselessly displayed with every product, every police manoeuvre. This is the more possible because, increasingly, America is less an actual place with roots and history than it is a virtual microcosm of the globe. By one set of statistics, it is the most powerful nation on the earth, by another – for example, infant mortality – it is just another third world country. Within the United States, a mass of dispossessed are kept in thrall by the image of America – by the idea of aspiration, by the notion that failure is their fault and yet contradictorily that tomorrow may still bring a golden dawn.

However, the myth of America, the myth of the market, is not enough. America and the market must *stand* for something – otherwise one would have once again fascism. It is clear that we do not have this, but something new and different. State socialism, positivism, fascism and Nazism all embraced, but severely qualified, the values of the market and of abstract production. Since 1970 though, we have had a revived and purified liberalism, a neo-capitalism. This neo-capitalism, in postmodern style, openly exults in the liberal hall of mirrors. However, the pure empty reflection is always in some sense impossible – not necessarily the real, but at least more positive symbolic values always cast their shadow, even in the fairground. So neo-liberalism does not seek, like fascism, to fill liberalism's empty heart with darkness; rather it rejoices in this emptiness and yet *still* at some level seeks to escape it. Not to fill the middle, but at once to celebrate and yet *exit* the vicious circle of representing and representation.

This, in my view, is just the role of fundamentalist or else extreme evangelical protestantism. Everywhere a revival of the latter has accompanied the emergence of neo-capitalism, or else Jewish, Islamic

³⁵ See Giovanni Arrighi, 'Tracking Global Turbulence' in *New Left Review* 20, 2nd Series, March–April 2003, 5–73.

and even Buddhist and Hindu parodies of protestant evangelicalism have performed the same job.³⁶ Fundamentalism has its roots partially in theological voluntarism – so here we see a certain return to the religious roots of liberalism itself. God has given us the creation for our free use; he handed over a material and social world to private ownership without gift and to merely formal and contractual regulation, yet this regulation itself echoes the arbitrary covenants God has established for our salvation. A contract is literal and unambiguous, supposedly. So is God's word to us, supposedly. Here the freedom of the State and of the individual remain, and remain unbridged; yet they are sacralised as echoing the sovereign freedom of God. This is not classical fascism, but if one wants to speak of a new 'religious market fascism' then I would not demur.

It is not an accident that this tendency is most marked in the United States and has its headquarters there. For in a sense the U.S. *never had* a 19th century – never had historicism and the cult of society and culture and socialist populism. It remains in a way up to the present 18th century in character, but a specific, different 18th century noted by Tocqueville. Moreover, this difference has itself always bifurcated: on the one hand, Tocqueville noted that the most liberal country was in fact *not* liberal at all – not most essentially driven by the market, by the State, nor even by the trade in polite civility that he also recorded.³⁷ At bottom, because Americans were the real settlers of Eden, they had given the lie to liberalism, by showing that at the outset lay not the lone individual but rather the art of association – always for concrete, and so religious purposes. The United States was first of all a bizarrely plural neo-gothic multitude of churches and sects. Here was the source of a genuine Christian republicanism and of the exchange of real gifts. And this source remains today. However, Tocqueville also noted the tendency of American religion towards the *ersatz*: people embraced religion in the U.S., he suggested, often for half-admitted *pragmatic* reasons – *this* is the American version of filling up the empty heart of liberalism.³⁸ Religion in the U.S., he observed, tends to be simplified and non-intellectual, popular rather than learned (in Europe today it is just the opposite), acting as a safety valve to ensure that Americans, unlike Frenchmen and women, do not use their freedom to question bourgeois ethical values, which indeed became in America further

³⁶ The ongoing researches of Paul Morris (of Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand) are tending to show this. For further reflections on the relation between religion and the nation state and the way the latter always has to re-recruit and define the former, see Talal Asad, *Formulations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003).

³⁷ Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 104–5; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 364.

³⁸ Manent, *Modern Liberty and its Discontents*, 105.

banalized. Religion in the U.S. had already decided on all the big questions and this tended (and tends) to shore up the bizarre notion that the American constitution has decided forever on all the big political questions.

As I have already indicated, there are today Islamic and Jewish partial parallels to this quintessentially Protestant fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism tends to be urban and middle class; opposed to material and sacramental mediation of the sacred, pro-capitalist, and textually literalist. Conservative Zionism likewise qualifies Judaism to embrace a modern race-based state, the unrestricted market economy and a relentlessly literal reading of the Hebrew Bible, which ties prophecy to land in perpetuity.

All these fundamentalisms are modern. Modern science insists on literalism as regards facts, and protestant fundamentalism was born (around 1900) in a construal of the Bible as presenting a parallel universe of revealed facts alongside the realm of natural facts.³⁹ Catholic, orthodox Christianity, by contrast insists that the abiding truth of the Old Testament is allegorical: literal violence points figuratively to a future revelation of embodied peace in Christ.⁴⁰ In science, the literal, observable thing tends to incite dissection, vivisection, stasis and death; this alone permits control and regularity. Likewise in religion, a revealed word which is both arbitrary and literal can only be ascertained in its instance when it is not the communication of gift, but rather the imposition of violence, of an ending and a death-dealing. Science and fundamentalism can then readily collude with each other.

Hence today the world is increasingly governed and fought over by a fearful combination of literal readers of the Hebrew scriptures together with out-and-out postmodern liberal scientific nihilists who shamelessly rejoice in the ceaseless destruction of every rooted and ancient tradition and even the roots and long habits of *nature* herself.

So if today, there is a problem of the recrudescence of intolerant religion, this is not a problem that liberalism can resolve, but rather a problem that liberalism tends to engender. We cannot oppose it in the name of liberal human rights, because this notion also revolves in a futile circle: these rights are supposedly natural, yet inert uncreated nature has never heard of them. They only exist when the State proclaims them, yet the State alone cannot legitimate them, else they cease to be natural and so general and objective.

A person's right is only a reality when recognized by another. But in that case, the *duty* of the other is the inner reality of right. Why should a person not be tortured? Because he owns his body by right?

³⁹ See James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1984).

⁴⁰ See *Theology and Social Theory*, 20 and John Milbank, Review of M.S. Burrows and Paul Rorem, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* in *Journal of Theological Studies*, October 1995, vol. 46, Part 2, 660–70.

But in that case the liberal state will always exert its right of eminent domain in an emergency when the 'rights' of the majority can be said to justify this, as today in the case of the pursuit of terrorists and 'terrorists'. Talal Asad has pointed out that the liberal idea that torture 'transgresses human rights' has *in no way* prevented nearly all liberal States from resorting to torture. The real difference from non-liberal States is that *they torture in secret*. Asad explains this in terms of the history of the West's attitude both to evidence and pain: once, direct confession was regarded – quite reasonably, since circumstances and witnesses may always mislead – as the crucial factor in truth, in a period when neither the inflicting nor the suffering of measured pain (witness asceticism) was regarded so negatively as it is today. From the Enlightenment onwards though, increased horror at pain and its exhibition in an era now more confined to notions of imminent and palpable happiness, was conjoined with a greater trust (linked to an empiricist sensibility) in circumstantial evidence: a trust which then and ever since has, in fact, led to horrendous miscarriages of justice. This betrays the fact that at bottom liberalism cares more about ravages to the body than violations of the spirit. The former nevertheless, as Asad so precisely notes, *are* still admitted, and in fact on an *unparalleled* scale where they can be quantified and made part of a utilitarian calculus: thus reasons of State in modernity have permitted massive civilian casualties in war, and continue to permit for the same reason torture in secret (and now in the open) – in fact an augmentation of pain's intensity where the circumstances are deemed to warrant this.⁴¹

A person should not be tortured rather because of her intrinsic value, because she resides in the image of God or something like that. Such a view recognizes that spiritual and bodily integrity are inseparable, and that the body is more than a possessed domain which may be troubling to its mental owner. For the former view the body confesses as much as the mind, and therefore must not be violated – for the sake of truth as well as mercy. Torture may be often carried out by religions, but only genuine religion, not liberalism, can promise a rationale to stop torture.

Likewise, there is no 'right' to freedom of religious opinion or expression, as if truth were something one could own and develop at random; rather, truth requires free consent else it is not understood, and a freely consented-to partial error displays more truth than an obviously or subtly coerced, or even a mechanically habitual opinion. But this principle that truth requires free consent, that profound truth is irreducibly subjective, is *itself* entirely religious: indeed fully at home only, one could argue, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As with the prohibition of torture, only the religious

⁴¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 100–27.

notions of these traditions which insist on ‘consent of the heart to truth’ fully safeguard free-consent, since if this is only a ‘property we have in our person’ a government will always appropriate this private property for ‘general use’ in an emergency – suspending religious liberties along with other freedoms. Indeed, Asad also argues that in a situation where biotechnical companies ‘own’ human genetic material, the question of when the human is in the subjective ‘owning’ position, including owning rights, and when he is in the object-position of a thing possessed, becomes itself something that only the market decides. Hence it becomes clear that the entrepreneurial capitalist’s rights which international human rights agreements also underwrite, are the only real serious rights of rights discourse.⁴²

What really guarantees human dignity and freedom, I have just argued, is something like the idea that the individual is in the image of God. This image is for Christians restored to lustre by baptism and chrism. Christic anointing renders us all kings, all rulers. As kings we are not impotently free with no necessary influence, but more realistically we are dangerously free with inevitable influence. We are free as givers: to give a gift is to run the risk of violence; it is always something of an imposition. But if every free act proceeds outwards it is itself both always a gift and something of an imposition. Nobody ever asked me ‘to say just that’, ‘do just that’ and it *may* hurt, indeed it may rankle forever. Inversely, though, we *cannot* be free only by trying to dominate: every time I act and give I am somewhat bound to the people who suffer my actions, receive my gifts.

For this reason, Pope John Paul II has stressed in his political thinking, as Russell Hittenger has pointed out, that while Christian kings have mostly vanished, the kingship of all remains the key to Christian politics. For Christianity the human being is a *Basilikon Zoon* (Eusebius of Caesarea) before he or she is a *Zoon Politikon*. Each Christian occupies a *munus*, which is an office linked to gift in the sense of talent. This talent exists for others as well as herself – it must be communicated. Thus the Pope points out, in a way that seems commensurate with Wyclif, that human political rule commences not just in Adam’s dominion over nature, but also in the mutual bestowing on each other of Adam and Eve. After the Fall, this mutuality and bestowing were contaminated and women especially were subordinated and degraded. But Christ the King restores to us the idea that to rule is to serve – he gives to us again the *munus regale* itself.⁴³

Today then, we need to surpass liberal democracy and search again for the common good in ceaseless circulation and creative

⁴² Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 127–59.

⁴³ See Hittenger, ‘The *Munus Regale*’. And see the Papal encyclicals, *De Familia Christianae Muneribus*, para. 63; and *Christifidelis Laici*, para. 14, as well as *Lumen Gentium*, para 3b.

development, a search that may involve laws, but more fundamentally involves charity beyond the law. Our poles of reference should not be the fantasised pure individual nor the pure sovereign state (natural or globalised) nor the pure free market. Instead we should both locate and form real groups pursuing real goods and exchanging real gifts amongst themselves and with each other according to measures judged to be intrinsically fair. We need to acknowledge the place and point of families, schools, localities, towns, associations for genuine production and trade (not the mere pursuit of profit), and transnational bodies.⁴⁴ However, if we conceive this within immanence or theological voluntarism (as with Calvinist versions of corporatism: Kuyper, etc.) then these groups will themselves be reduced to quasi-individual mutually contracting entities and we will be back in the empty liberal echo-chamber.

Instead, all these groups can communicate and exchange with each other only if all are conceived as operating under grace. Only if we can come to regard corporate bodies as receiving the objective and subjective gifts of created realities that are already imbued with pre-human meaning. Only if we can conceive the work of these bodies as further realising the natural order in order to offer the gift of Creation back to a God who is no arbitrary sovereign but a giver who can order what he gives because it is intrinsically, true, good and beautiful.

Only a global liturgical polity can save us now from literal violence.

⁴⁴ See Hittenger, 'The *Munus Regale*' for the correct comment that the principle of 'subsidiarity' is *not* a liberal one that means 'do everything that can possibly be done at a local level, only resorting to higher levels or the centre in extreme necessity'. Rather it means 'do everything at the *appropriate* level'. Hence, as Hittenger also says, liberals who think that subsidiarity should be applied to Church government as a liberal principle are wrong, but conservatives who think that it should *not* be applied are also wrong, since it is not averse to hierarchy. Of course, Hittenger and I would probably disagree about 'appropriate levels' in the case of Church government.