

On the Christian Roots of American Republicanism

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Our republican Founding did not favor Christianity, but Christianity favored our republican Founding. Subtract the faith and the support is gone. Citizens of all religious professions or of none but who love liberty therefore ought not to be indifferent with respect to the end of Christian preeminence in American culture. American republicanism owes its origin and a large measure of its past success to Christianity. To see this and to begin to understand what social and political life might look like without Christianity, we must work back from the pre-Christian epoch when Christianity brought mankind out of darkness, study anew the political development of Christian civilization, and reconsider its relation to the American Founding.

Is it simply an incidental fact that American republicanism emerged from Christendom, or is Christianity in some way responsible for its establishment, growth, and sustenance? As the United States seems to be moving into a post-Christian epoch, the answer to this question will tell Americans what more they stand to lose along with their faith.

To those who are not interested in the preservation of faith for its own sake, the retreat of Christian influence might seem inconsequential. If the American Founders had deemed Christianity important to the preservation of healthy republicanism, would they not have done more to secure its place in the American political regime? After all, our organic laws, the

Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States, are silent or explicitly neutral about the country's religious commitment.

Notwithstanding the references to "Providence," a "Creator," and "Nature's God," the Declaration of Independence does not say that Christianity is a prerequisite for good government, defined as government that fulfills its fundamental duty to secure the natural rights of its people. The prerequisites are that political society knows what its rights are and is generally committed to protecting them, but according to the Declaration, knowledge of natural rights is not the peculiar gift of Christianity. We are left to infer that any religion or irreligion could be reconcilable with good government. The only places religion is directly addressed in either document are in Article VI of the original Constitution, which protects public servants of heterodox religious professions, and the First Amendment, which protects the free exercise of religion and prohibits Congress from establishing Christianity or any other creed of religious character as an official religion. To the extent that our Founding documents say anything at all about religion, one could defensibly conclude that religious indifference was built into the American political regime at its outset.

Nevertheless, citizens of all religious professions (or, for that matter, of none) who love liberty ought not to be indifferent about the end of Christian preeminence in American culture. American republicanism owes its origin and a large measure of its past success to Christianity. To see this and to begin to understand what social and political life might look like without Christianity, we must work back from the pre-Christian epoch when Christianity brought mankind out of darkness, study anew the political development of Christian Civilization, and reconsider its relation to the American Founding.

Comparative Savagery

The Declaration claims that all members of the human family are equal and endowed with the natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and that these are self-evident truths. If they are self-evident truths, then they are knowable to anyone with ordinary sense. Hence, all men, irrespective of time and place, are responsible for knowing and aligning their conduct with these truths. Even the barbarians are without excuse.

Had mankind measured up to this standard by the time the United States was established? No, preached Reverend Israel Evans to the General Court of New Hampshire in 1791: "The histories of mankind, with only a few exceptions, are the records of human guilt, oppression, and misery."

The atrocities of “inhuman butchers” had “filled so many bloody pages of history.” These butchering tyrants had “slaughtered millions of the human race, for no other purpose but to extend their cruel and ambitious power, and oppress and lay waste the world.”¹

Evans was right, and scholarship since then has heaped the evidence high in support of his thesis. More often than not, rather than demonstrating obedience to the great moral truths that should have been self-evident to them, men have treated each other with appalling cruelty in flat disregard of their brethren’s natural rights. The scholarly literature on the most flagrant attacks on natural rights—cannibalism, slavery, and human sacrifice—is deep and constantly augmented by new studies.² The sobering fact is that everywhere human societies have existed, these atrocities have existed—not hidden from view as high crimes against the principles of society are so hidden, but held up as noble deeds approved by the principles of their society. One suspects that after just a day spent reviewing this evidence of universal human depravity, even an avowed atheist would have trouble disagreeing with the judgment of Christ that there is none good but God.³ Secular scholarship has enhanced the rational respectability of the Christian doctrine of man’s universal sinfulness.

Common patterns of oppression appear across cultures, although separated by time and distance. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia, the Assyrians proudly memorialized the vicious punishments they inflicted on those who resisted their rule. King Assurnasirpal II boasted that he piled up their corpses, flayed and burned them alive, impaled them on sharpened stakes, and decorated his palace with their decapitated heads. Other Assyrian kings bragged of their own innovations. One hung the severed heads of enemy kings around the necks of the dead kings’ captured nobles and marched them through Nineveh to music. Their inscriptions say they killed their victims “like pigs,” and in fact, they executed them on tables used for slaughtering animals.⁴ To such people, slavery was hardly scandalous, and they practiced it.⁵ Kings of Dahomey in West Africa hoisted the heads of conquered enemies in their palaces, built by slave labor. They went to war to take captives for the purpose of selling them into slavery or for human sacrifice. In one instance, they sacrificed four thousand victims. Their harsh, absolute rule precipitated revolts.⁶

The early inhabitants of Europe rank alongside the savage offenders of natural right. The Gauls beyond the Alps decorated their abodes with the severed heads of their enemies. Their Druid priests sacrificed men in order to foretell the future in the twitching bodies and spilled blood of the victims. They also practiced slavery among themselves: Diodorus Siculus

commented in passing that they would trade one of their own people as a slave to the Romans for a jar of wine.⁷ Julius Caesar wrote that the Gauls were divided into noble and subaltern ranks, the latter so lowly that they were little better than slaves, and noted that the slaves of the rich were sacrificed on their masters' funeral pyres.⁸

Archaeological scholarship confirms what the ancient texts attest: that slavery was already “a substantial part” of all Celtic societies before contact with the Romans.⁹ Among the native people of ancient Spain just before the Roman conquest, for example, a military aristocracy ruled and kept slaves. They also used the skulls of their enemies for adornment by ritually nailing them to public places.¹⁰ The Germanic tribes, said Tacitus, enslaved their own and used them in agriculture. Tacitus further noted that their masters—presumably warriors who did not work and were indolent in times of peace—often killed these slaves in fits of anger.¹¹ Like the Gauls, the Germans practiced human sacrifice and sold their own people as slaves to the Romans.¹²

The literature suggests that the presence of extreme violations of natural right correlated with the rule of one or few over the many and that, together, oppression and monarchic-aristocratic rule have dominated human history. Recent studies in the relatively new interdisciplinary field of bioarchaeology have added empirical evidence that strengthens this hypothesis. Researchers in bioarchaeology bring the skills of forensic doctors to the study of human bones in archaeological sites. Because the unequal distribution of resources and power manifests in diet, health, work, and violence, which leave traces in bones, bioarchaeologists can mine those bones for valuable data that can help them to reconstruct the social and political organization of society. In the language of political science, their studies frequently identify clearly distinguished ruling and ruled classes, harsh rule, and the manner of oppression.¹³

Atrocities and Political Regimes

How do we explain this historical evidence, and what broke the recurring pattern of tyranny and oppression and led to the founding of a regime in 1776 that was dedicated to principles directly opposed to tyranny and oppression?

The political theory of Thomas Hobbes, with a proviso, best explains the correlation of cruelty and the rule of the one or few. Wherever men live in fear, in an effort to save themselves from violence, they will seek out and do homage to one or a few who are perceived to have superior strength.

The savior-prince may well turn out to be as vicious as or not much better than one's neighbors in prior anarchy were or the prior prince was. The widespread historical pattern of atrocities shows that the relative harshness of rule does not deviate much from the vicious mean, but in ages when men are especially cruel, options are especially limited. Usually, a less cruel ruler is the best reward that men who successfully run the deadly risk of shifting allegiance can win. In his commentaries on Gaul, Julius Caesar observed the pattern of conduct that we see in Hobbes's theory. To maintain their authority, the leading men of Gaul depended on their effectiveness in protecting their retainers. If they failed to protect them, the commoners would seek out stronger men and pledge themselves as slaves to their new masters.¹⁴

The key that unlocks this tendency of political society toward the concentration of rule in few and fewer hands is the prevalence of oppression. The greater the active rejection of natural right—in other words, the worse the oppression—the more likely it is that unequal strength shall obtain rule. In such a political society, the attempt to found a republic is a fool's errand. Oppression is the active rejection of natural rights, and the stability of a republic depends on the opposite sentiment, on the prevalence of mutual respect for the rights of others, even if the citizens fail to recognize and express that dependence in those terms. No sane person would entrust the protection of his own rights to a political society that regularly devours itself and, by example, teaches everyone the respectability of doing violence to others if you can get away with it. The safer, more prudent course would be to entrust protection to one who seems to be strong and less cruel. Within an already established republic, if the mores within political society change and humanity gives way to cruelty, the republic cannot last, as *Federalist* 9 and 10 explain.¹⁵ Once cabals of citizens, or factions, organize to assault the rights of their fellow citizens, equality becomes lost in the strokes and counterstrokes against life, liberty, and property, and unequal strength becomes prized: the new coin of the realm, the new basis for rule. Rule must concentrate in fewer and fewer hands.

Occasionally, remarkable exceptions appear in the historical record that lend weight to the claims of the Declaration and to the idea that the origin of monarchy-aristocracy is unequal strength under general conditions of inhumanity, not kings' and nobles' singular inhumanity. These are the few who suddenly and inexplicably exhibit a conscience of the type we might predict to see, if the truths of the Declaration are knowable to all, at all times and places. Rather than "using cruelty well" as a political tool, they turn their power against the inhumane practices of their own cultures and lift up wounded humanity in their respective realms.

In the third century before Christ, King Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire conquered most of the Indian subcontinent. After a final, bloody war against the Kalinga people, he laid down his arms and suddenly broadcast public expressions of his remorse for having destroyed them, which included the enslavement of thousands. Then Ashoka devoted the rest of his life to studying the welfare of his realm and reforming his empire on what we would call humanitarian principles. By the edicts and teachings he spread throughout his empire, using a class of bureaucrats he created for that purpose, he promoted freedom of conscience, directed his people to avoid the killing of living things, and instructed them to treat slaves well. Ashoka insisted that slaves should be considered part of the family, respected, and governed gently.¹⁶ In Mesoamerica in the 10th century after Christ, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, philosopher-king of the Toltecs, suddenly refused to permit human sacrifice. His opposition was especially sensational because these sacrifices were a critical part of a sophisticated system of religion that was purportedly necessary for the perpetuation of mankind. Yet Quetzalcoatl, like Saint Augustine in *City of God*, imputed the instigation of this worship to demons and justified his refusal to support human sacrifice as a reflection of love for his people.¹⁷ Both the Mauryan and Toltec Empires resumed their harsh customs when the relatively gentle reigns of Ashoka and Quetzalcoatl ended.

Cases such as those of Ashoka and Quetzalcoatl affirm the likelihood that the problem with the Declaration's claims is not one of universal knowability (that is, whether they are self-evidently true). The Indian Ashoka, the Mexican Quetzalcoatl, and the American Founders all evince a commitment to governing principles that are tolerably comparable despite their separation by vast differences in time and place. Rather, these cases show that the problem with the Declaration's claims is that they are perennially weak, that political society rarely is devoted to upholding them and instead tends to give way to the historically dominant conditions of inhumanity. Ashoka and Quetzalcoatl stand out because they were morally enlightened kings. By their commands, they could instantly attach the highest political status to those principles, but they were rare examples. What of other men of conscience like them who lacked royal power? How many unknown to history have recognized the self-evident truths expressed in the Declaration but lived in societies that dishonored them? How many were too preoccupied with navigating violent societies to be bothered with moral speculation?

Religion seems to have been the only variable that has altered the default condition of mankind for sustained periods of time. Under the influence of the quasi-religion of Confucianism, the Han Dynasty perhaps came close to refounding ancient China on principles similar to those in the Declaration

but ultimately failed when the empire collapsed and divided. There is also considerable evidence that in some countries, Buddhism substantially modified conduct, ameliorating the grossest abuses of individual rights; but Buddhist countries also fell short of installing principles like those in the Declaration as their organizing principles of government.

Christianity is a unique case because its altering effect on social conditions continued to advance until its central moral teaching about man defined the mission of government. Christianity revolutionized one barbaric part of the world, and after many centuries of social and political development, of reshaping mores, governance, and social life, a nation adopted the principles of natural right for the first time in its founding law in 1776. That result was produced by more than a millennium of extraordinary devotion and sacrifice, and we can identify both the place where and the time when that history began.

The Franks and Christian Civilization

In 1841 in Notre Dame Cathedral, Father Henri-Dominique Lacordaire of the Order of Preachers (the Dominican Order) dubbed France “la fille aînée de l’Église” or “the eldest daughter of the Church.”¹⁸ He was alluding to the conversion of the Franks, the fathers of France and builders of Christian Europe, to Nicene Christianity under the auspices of the Holy See of Rome. More than any other people, the Franks were responsible for defending and extending the boundaries of Christendom and developing Christian Civilization within those boundaries.

Looking forward from the time of the conversion of the Franks, they might have seemed the unlikeliest of choices to carry Christianity into the future.¹⁹ By 508 AD, the probable year when Saint Remigius (the Bishop of Reims) baptized King Clovis I, the episcopal sees of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem presided over major centers of Christian wealth, culture, population, and learning that were protected by the resurgent Roman Empire in the East. Clovis was a minor king of the tribe of Salian Franks occupying a small territory around modern Tournai, Belgium, within the former jurisdiction of the Roman Empire in the West that had collapsed. Rome itself had been sacked and occupied multiple times during the preceding hundred years. In their neighborhood of Western Europe, the ruling barbarian people were Arians, votaries of a heretical offshoot of Christianity, or pagans, as the Franks were.²⁰

In the course of time, Muslim armies overran all four of these episcopal sees, which constituted four of the five sees of the Pentarchy and

three-quarters of Christian lands.²¹ The two horns of those armies did not advance farther than Tours, France, on one side, and Vienna, Austria, on the other. The landmass between those points overlapped the Frankish empire that Clovis founded and that his Merovingian and Carolingian successors expanded. Armies of Franks or armies of nations whose conversion to Christianity is ultimately attributable to the Franks halted the Muslim advance.²²

Under the protection of Frankish arms, the Holy See at Rome, the fifth see of the Pentarchy, was able to build its ecclesiastic empire. The Franks subdued the enemies of the Catholic Church, and the Church subdued the savagery of the Franks. The transformation of the Franks from brutes to chivalrous knights may be quickly ascertained by contrasting the countless instances of lechery, thuggery, betrayal, and murder in the *History of the Franks*, written by Gregory of Tours in the sixth century, to the admonitions to piety and charity in the letter written by Saint Louis IX, King of France, to his son in the 13th century.

The taming of the Franks was an impressive feat. The Roman orator Libanius had said of the war-loving Franks that “[p]eace is for them a horrible calamity” and that, according to their custom, they fought to the death in battle. Before their conversion, they had attacked Trier, the capital of Roman Gaul, four times in 34 years in the fifth century and had devastated the country, forcing the Romans to move the Gallic capital to Arles in the South.²³ Of his ancestors, the Comte de Montalembert wrote that the Merovingian princes had “directed massacres or executions, which rank among the most odious recollections in history.” Nevertheless:

[Despite their] deceit and ferocity, wild incontinence and savage pride...it is impossible to deny the sincerity of their faith, and the influence which Christian virtue and penitence almost always exercised upon them. They passed with a rapidity which now seems incomprehensible from the atrocious excesses of their native cruelty to passionate demonstrations of contrition and humility.

Always, it was scolding clergy who converted them and exacted contrition and penance from them.²⁴

Soon the Frankish nobles were founding and richly endowing monasteries and redeeming and manumitting slaves; and many of them, pious and zealous for religious life, became priests, nuns, missionaries, monks, and saints.²⁵ Concerning Saint Audoen, a bishop of Rouen from a noble Frankish family who preached to his pagan brethren, his biographer said that “he transformed the savage cruelty of the Franks into gentleness” so “that they turned from their pagan ways and voluntarily chose to submit

themselves to the yoke of Christ.”²⁶ So powerful was their zeal for piety that Carloman, son of the Frankish political leader Charles Martel, yielded power and wealth to his younger brother Pippin, who became king of the Franks and father of Charlemagne, so that he could live out his days as a monk at Monte Cassino. There, Montalembert wrote that in humility “he did not wish to be recognised.”²⁷ Just a few centuries after their ancestors were murdering and pillaging with little self-restraint, the great-nephew of Carloman, the emperor Louis the Pious, unveiled a new motto of his greatly reformed Franks to a rebellious tributary: “The Franks are invincible in war, but pacific, full of religion and humanity, and never taking up arms without regret.”²⁸

The Franks sent missionaries to their barbarian cousins, and the process of transformation was repeated and extended farther still. They reached out to the Anglo-Saxons in England, where “[o]ne single century,” British historian Samuel Astley Dunham wrote, had “raised them from barbarism to civilisation; had transformed them from bloodthirsty savages into mild, and humane, and affectionate men; had banished from their hearts the selfishness which is everywhere the distinguishing mark of barbarity, and in its place had implanted the self-denying and magnanimous virtues.” At least 30 of their kings and queens are claimed to have voluntarily abdicated their thrones for monasteries and convents and joined in missionary work.²⁹

For converting and ennobling the spiritual and moral lives of the barbarians of Western Europe, many priests became martyrs. Too often, the ancient savagery of the barbarians overcame their new piety. During the first 150 years after the conversion of Clovis, the Franks cut down many of their confessors and scolding schoolmasters, as the known body count of bishops shows, but the unarmed priests simply replenished their ranks and cheerfully completed their work. They were responsible for the transformation of Europe, which was acknowledged and deplored by Nietzsche because conversion brought with it “slave morality,” the adoration of weakness and the humiliation of strength; in other words, the beatitudes converted into principles of custom and law.³⁰

The Political Regime of Christendom

The conversion of the Franks and their revolutionized moral character gave Christendom a new and strong geographic base upon which Christian government was refounded. We now turn to the establishment of that government.

Government collapsed around the city of Rome in the fifth century amid invasions, raids, and succession struggles. These disasters and threats of more disasters revealed the impotence of imperial authorities, and this engendered fear among the people. Pope Saint Leo the Great stepped into the vacuum. Using the weapons of peace, he turned Attila the Hun away from Rome and persuaded Geiseric, king of the Vandals, to end his depredations in the city. Under the supervision of Leo, the Church at Rome organized relief for the people and redeemed captives taken into slavery by the marauding barbarians. These efforts spread to other dioceses in Italy and Gaul.

In short, the Church was governing and filling the place of government vacated by imperial administration in the Western Empire, and Leo began to act as a head of government. His homilies took on the character of addresses by an executive and founder of a new political regime, and the people of Rome, awed by Leo's courage and charity, followed his promptings. The Church would reestablish the Roman Empire on new principles—principles found in the beatitudes that lift up the poor and the weak. Why? Because, Leo said, the Lord commanded “that you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And who is a neighbor? “[N]ot only those who are joined to us by friendship or kinship, but all people.” He explained that all people have a “common nature, be they enemies or allies, free or slave,” because “One Creator fashioned us all.” The practice of Christian citizenship within the new order, whereby all acted charitably toward all irrespective of distinctions, promised an overthrow of the default condition of mankind, an end to enmity and atrocities, and the establishment of civil peace.³¹

In addition, Leo represented his high office, the seat of Saint Peter, as the rightful and supreme authority over Christendom. Leo understood that during his earthly ministry, Christ had conferred authority on Peter to administer justice over a unified ecclesiastical order. However, the pope was not expected to rule Christendom directly. Thirty years after Leo's papacy, Pope Gelasius I added some clarity to the constitutional structure of Christendom in a letter to Anastasius, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. According to the letter, God ordained that the world is ruled by the authority of the popes and the power of kings, but papal authority is higher than royal power. The royal office is human; the sacerdotal office, divine. Priests must answer to God for the conduct of kings, and even kings depend on priests for the sacraments.³²

Scripture does affirm that the function of temporal rulers is legitimated by God and that those rulers ought to be obeyed, but Gelasius affirmed the higher authority on Earth that God has delegated to the Church. The

consequence is that, while the human office may be preeminent in executing rule, the divine office may judge and guide the administration of rule due to its higher authority. In other words, the Church was a divinely appointed authority charged with presiding over the integrity of the political regime of Christendom and defending the Christian constitution. With respect to temporal government, the Church was not responsible for executing the daily tasks of rule; it was responsible for ensuring that temporal rule was just and faithful to the first principles of Christian government. The Church was intended to be the voice of justice on Earth and a check on earthly power.

Away from Rome, the bishops of Gaul integrated themselves into the new constitutional order under the leadership of the pope. There, the system shaped by Leo and Gelasius was set into motion, and it worked. The Frankish state and the Church had separate functions but were partners, each assisting the other in discharging the functions of government. Clergy with legal training moved smoothly between royal administration and diocesan duties. Church councils produced canons or ecclesiastic legislation that respected and shaped secular law, and the councils served as courts.³³

The bishops adopted roles as fathers of their people in their dioceses, protecting the destitute and the weak, redeeming slaves, and winning the people's trust and affection, just as Leo the Great had done in Rome. With a grateful people behind the bishops, kings could not dismiss their advice and rebukes, and the bishops, supported by an approving pope, could use that popular power to shape the development of temporal government.³⁴ Before he had baptized Clovis, Saint Remigius was already beseeching his catechumen to use his wealth and power to succor the afflicted, widows, and orphans and to manumit slaves.³⁵ At the Council of Orleans in 511, the first synod Clovis called after his baptism, 32 bishops committed to using a portion of episcopal revenues to aid the poor and sick and to redeeming captives from slavery.³⁶

Consistent with the political direction established by Leo and Gelasius, churchmen began to define more specific duties and limits of Christian monarchy, an effort that culminated in formal pronouncements by the Council of Paris in 829. According to the council, the first duty of the king should be to defend the church and its clergy, which is to say that the supreme duty of the king is to support the protectors of the constitution. Next in order of priority is the duty of the king to care for the poor and weak, which manifests the first principles of the political regime. Finally, the Church's check on temporal rule, which Gelasius had advanced in theory, was put into action. Although scripture commands obedience to rulers, if a king fails to uphold

justice and behaves like a tyrant, he has forfeited his title as king and may be removed, because a king properly speaking is one who rules well, not one who oppresses his people.³⁷ The Church had asserted the power to impeach and remove, which is the institutional substitute for rebellion.

Articulation of the Political Regime

The maturation and expansion of Christian government entailed a clearer understanding of distinctly Christian governing principles and the development of governing institutions faithful to those principles.

The guiding principles of Christian government—the natural equality and dignity of mankind—appear in the homilies, sermons, biblical exegeses, and writings of many Christian theologians in the centuries before Leo the Great. For example:

- In the dialogue *Octavius*, written sometime between the second and third centuries, the Christian apologist Minucius Felix claims that by nature, all men are born with the ability to reason and without distinction of sex or rank;
- In the fourth century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa's revealing and unique philosophical meditation on the creation of man in God's image contrasts the more dignified likeness of man to the Creator in Christianity and the degraded likeness of man to creation in paganism;
- The apologist Lactantius explained why the Greek and Roman philosophers did not understand the equality of mankind and as a result omitted this necessary element from their conception of justice; and
- It would be hard to put forward any work, ancient or modern, that surpasses the pathos and surgical logic of Saint Ambrose's commentary on Naboth with respect to the perennial oppression of the poor by the rich and the undoing of our created state as natural equals made for loving one another.³⁸

Latin Christendom could draw from these and other sources as well as a long history of the charitable deeds of saints that provided robust support for first principles. However, in articulating or working out the laws and institutions that comprise political order, rulers need common definitions of first principles from established, politically authoritative sources. What

the older sources clearly affirm is the natural equality and dignity of mankind. Less clear was their measure of the equal dignity of man and how that should be recognized in law. What may human dignity command as its due? What is owed to that dignity? In other words, what are the natural rights of mankind if indeed mankind possesses natural rights?

Medieval philosophers, theologians and canonists tackled this problem in what ought to be framed as a broad, multi-century research program within Latin Christendom, certainly occasioned by many disagreements but heading toward one endpoint: to fix the rights of mankind with precision according to reason and Christian revelation. The effort included many famous names of medieval Europe: Gratianus, Saint Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Jean Gerson, and Francisco de Vitoria among others.³⁹

Identification of some rights (for example, the right to resist tyranny) was easy, and identification of others (like the right to property) was notoriously difficult. Whatever the results would be, the magnitude and direction of the effort reflected a deep commitment to doing justice to man in a way that had never been attempted and, as a consequence, further to shape conceptions of how government should be administered, which was done by kings and nobles at this time. Hence, treatises proliferated on the duty of ruling well or, one might say, on the right of the people, in consideration of their dignity, to be ruled well according to the Christian principles of justice.

In the 12th-century work *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury confirmed the political order of Christendom established by Popes Leo and Gelasius. The priesthood is the soul of the political body, the voice of justice, that directs the state, whereas the prince is the head. A true prince conforms his statutes to the higher law of justice, guarded by the soul of the state, obeys the law, and rules for the common good. Tyrants reject the constraints of law and seek to become a law unto themselves, impiously imitating God. Common people, too, can behave tyrannically toward anyone in their power. John's conclusions also repeat the findings of the Council of Paris, centuries earlier, that insofar as princes behave tyrannically, they are no longer princes properly speaking and may be removed and even killed.

In his letter to the King of Cyprus, *On Kingship*, and in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, the great 13th-century priest and theologian of the Dominican Order, justified rebellion against tyranny as the second blow of self-defense, answering the first blow of injustice against the people; yet in consideration of the proofs of history as well as reason, he concluded that popular rule was more prone to lapse into tyranny than was royal government. For William Peraldus, another 13th-century Dominican, the power of the prince was derived from the people. Pride leads a prince astray, and he

should seek humility as Christ taught in order to be loved and supported by his people. He should love God, love his neighbor, and serve his people with humility in keeping with those commands of Christ. Many of the writers in this literature emphasize the diffusion of education, greater equality between the sexes, and the duty to avoid war.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the development of governing institutions corresponded to these developments in theory. Although kings were the heads and priests were the souls of Christian countries, the Church essentially ran a parallel or adjunct government, committed to charitable works including systems of social welfare, hospitals, and education.⁴¹

In addition, the constitution of Christendom's political regime was clarified further still. In the ninth century, Pope John VIII had used the name *respublica christiana* to signify the corporate unity of Christians. The kings ruled according to law and famously clashed with popes so that, in general, they resembled Roman governors more than independent princes, and the popes seemed more like emperors. In the 11th century, Pope Gregory VII asserted the papal right to depose royals and absolve the people from allegiance to those rulers who were deemed wicked by the papacy. He reaffirmed the corporate unity of Christian society and the pope as the spiritual father of that realm.⁴²

In the 15th century, Paulus Vladimiri, a Polish priest who was a professor of canon law and rector of the University of Cracow, proposed a renovation of the constitutional order in a memorandum prepared for the Council of Constance. Under his plan, the nation-states composing Europe would confederate and send representatives to a federal center to legislate for the whole. The Holy Roman Emperor would be charged with maintaining law and order, and the pope would preside over the Church and oversee temporal rule. The people of the member states would enjoy fundamental rights derived from natural law, including the rights of property and conscience. Though not adopted, the plan at the endpoint of this medieval timeline illustrates how Christian first principles unleashed a logic terminating in the design of structures of government that aimed at securing the rights of mankind.⁴³

Much later, a similar constitution was proposed that borrowed the institutional advances produced by the political logic of Christianity. "Happily for mankind," Alexander Hamilton acknowledged in *Federalist* No. 9, "stupendous fabrics reared on the basis of liberty" had "flourished for ages."⁴⁴ Those institutional inventions were tested in Christian Europe and then studied, improved and refined, and placed in the Constitution of the United States.

Revolution

Evidence that further demonstrates the similitude of the first principles of Christian government and the principles of the Declaration of Independence may be adduced from the history of popular uprisings from the mid to late Middle Ages. Leaders—some of them clergy—of these uprisings and attempts to reform government drew the same democratic conclusions from Christian scripture that readers can draw from the Declaration.

We begin by asking why, if Christianity affirms natural equality and the dignity of man, entailing rights, monarchy was the dominant form of government in Christendom. The answer is that the political institutions of Latin Christendom were aimed at securing good rule by producing better princes, tethering them to good law, and subjecting them to Church supervision. At least in France, the machinery was successful according to the priest Gerald of Wales, who served the Angevin court in England and presumably was less prone to pro-French bias. In his treatise on how to rule well, written at the end of the 12th century, he held up the French kings as a model. They were just, merciful, and generous toward their subjects. They heard complaints in person at court and permitted subjects to speak freely. They were chivalrous in personal conduct and moderate in their rule, and their successions were peaceful.⁴⁵

But the logic of natural equality and the dignity of man also led priests and laymen in revolutionary directions that were at odds with the system that was built. The known cases of these revolutionary disturbances show that, at least to the revolutionaries, fidelity to Christian principle demanded a more popular system of government. The origin of modern democratic revolutions, Alexis de Tocqueville argued in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, was the principle of equality in the Church, and he dated its perturbing effects on political society to the 12th century, holding up medieval France as exemplar.

In that century, Arnold of Brescia, along with John of Salisbury, was a student of Peter Abelard at the University of Paris, where many leading medieval intellects studied and taught. Arnold returned to Brescia, became a priest, participated in a popular revolt against the bishop, was expelled from Italy by Pope Innocent II, returned to France, was expelled from France, and finally was attracted to a republican revolution in Rome, where he became its leader and opposed both the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy. This republic of Rome lasted for several years until Arnold was captured and executed in 1155. From the available evidence, which includes writings from liberal men who were connected to him, Arnold was an uncompromising, imprudent man who lived in austerity and demanded the same from the priesthood. He insisted on popular rule and the Church's total retreat from temporal affairs.⁴⁶

In France from 1356 to 1357, Robert le Coq, Bishop of Laon, led the Estates General in an attempt to democratize the monarchy, giving control of military and monetary policy to councils administered by the estates. In this effort, le Coq allied himself with Etienne Marcel, the leader of the commoners. Marcel proposed a slate of his own reforms with the same end in mind. After the reforms failed, bloody revolts broke out. Among the rebels, later proceedings show, were a spirited priest named Verrigues; another, Jean Nerenget, parish priest of Gelicourt; and the brothers Jean and Guilbert Doublet, priests accused of being rebel captains in the dioceses of Beauvais and Amiens and of having participated in the destruction of the castles of Aumale and Poix.⁴⁷

Another priest, John Ball, was a leader of the peasant revolt of 1381 in England and was assisted by “nearly a score of clerics.” Ball preached natural equality from the text of the Bible and on that basis repudiated inequality in social and political life as ungodly. Like Arnold, he attacked the Church, for which he was excommunicated.⁴⁸ Although it is debated whether or not theologian John Wycliffe inspired or approved of the revolt, Ball definitely shared Wycliffe’s positions opposing inequality and hierarchy in the Church. Other examples can be adduced from the medieval period of clergy justifying their leadership or support of popular causes on religious principle, all the way forward in time to the participation by followers of Martin Luther in the bloody 1524–1525 Peasants’ Revolt in Germany.⁴⁹

Most of these revolutionary priests must have been very sincere but very imprudent men, and their cases highlight the dangerous consequences that flow from the improper application of sound principles to existing social and political conditions. In *The City of God*, Saint Augustine acknowledges that of course mankind is by nature equal but says that sin is the reason for inequality.⁵⁰ Hence, the only way to recover and maintain the created state of equality in political order on Earth is to make political society more heavenly by banishing sin or tempering its effects. In other words, successful republicanism depends on widespread piety. If one were to found a new political order on terms approaching absolute equality without considering the moral condition of society, one would need only to consult the legion of archaeological monographs on past atrocities to remind oneself of the possible result. For these reasons, the Catholic Church was understandably reticent to support such republican experiments and instead entrusted good government to princes whom the Church could educate and supervise. Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton, who was a professor at the University of Paris and the driving intellectual force behind Magna Carta, understood this problem well, and the provisions of Magna Carta amply reflect his prudence.⁵¹

However, the system developed by the Church ended after the Protestant Reformation. The corruption of men within the Catholic Church might deserve much of the blame for hastening the Protestant exit, but the result of following men like Luther and Calvin out of the Church instead of remaining with Erasmus to reform the Church from within was the weakening of the Church's supervision of earthly rule. The Reformation marks the end of the political regime of Christendom. The Church lacked the strength to check monarchs as it once did, and monarchs then asserted their independence from moral oversight by the Church. Hobbes even justified vesting spiritual authority in the sovereign. Because the Church could no longer check monarchs effectively, the people lost its protection from their rulers and were exposed. Arnold of Brescia had his wish—the papal retreat from temporal affairs—but the result was far from what he had dreamed. The contest within Christendom for earthly authority then was taken up by monarchs and the people, aptly pictured by the debate between Robert Filmer and John Locke. Monarchs asserted the divine right of kings; the people asserted popular sovereignty by natural right.⁵²

American Republicanism

Alexis de Tocqueville believed that the English Protestants who settled in Massachusetts Bay were the authors of American republicanism, and that judgment still seems right.⁵³ Although the New Englanders did not devise a famous theory of natural rights as Locke did more than half a century after they landed at Plymouth in 1620, they were from their earliest days republicans in the organization of their churches and then their communities because God and reason taught them that all men were created equal and had a right to liberty.⁵⁴ Their drift toward independence and self-government had already made them ungovernable according to the Council of English lords appointed to superintend the colony. As a result, the Council attempted to surrender the charter in 1635 back to the king, complaining that the New Englanders had “wholly excluded themselves from the public government of the Council” and “had made themselves a free people...and so framed unto themselves both new laws and new concepts of matters of religion.”⁵⁵ New England freemen pressed their rights, and New England magistrates acknowledged them; consent was understood to be the ground of legitimate government, and land relations were redesigned around the right to property.⁵⁶

The motive of the English emigrants was to go wherever they could best achieve their aim, to live in the closest possible conformity with the

dictates of Christian faith.⁵⁷ For that reason above all others, New England republicanism, despite sometimes having to labor against the irritating interference of the mother country, was as successful as any prior exemplar. *City of God* explains their simultaneous willingness to abandon earthly attachments and success in the most difficult earthly endeavor, the founding of a durable republic. The paradox of Christians' earthly citizenship is that, contrary to the calumny of pagan Romans in Augustine's day, Christians are excellent citizens on Earth because they first regard themselves as citizens of the city of God, which pagan idolatry of earthly things despises. As a result of Christians' primary allegiance to heaven, their character is renewed and softened. Augustine explained that by following the first law of the heavenly city—to love God with all one's heart and soul—Christians love what God loves, and because Christ revealed extraordinary love for mankind by His extraordinary sacrifice, Christians can love mankind also, which consists in desiring and doing good for one's neighbor, which is charity.⁵⁸

The New Englanders were well prepared to live up to that standard of citizenship. The Protestant revolution did leave Christendom with a great gift that was especially keen in those settlers: a revived zeal to live piously. In forswearing the authority of the Church, they were forswearing its sacraments and ministries. Because they did not recognize any intermediary between themselves and God, the success of the Protestant project demanded that each believer become his own priest, which required the piety at least equal to that of one sworn to a life without marriage and property for the sake of serving God. They were betting their eternal souls on their ability to live according to God's will on their own, and commoners did show a level of determination that an atheist or agnostic would likely find bizarre, in trying to understand and apply God's word to their lives with exact precision.⁵⁹ Both the intensity of their effort to audit their own souls for sin and their healthy fear of sin's many traps in life are reflected in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Their piety gave them an advantage in the effort to establish and maintain a republic, in overcoming the impeding effects of sin, and in recovering a measure of that primitive equality among themselves that was mankind's created condition. But they were not lovers of republicanism *per se*; they were not baptized Robespierres and Dantons whose goal was to exceed the glory of Athens and Rome. They loved God and their neighbor, and that is why they succeeded while others failed.

John Winthrop and other leading men among the New England settlers were the true founders of the United States.⁶⁰ They solved the perennial problem that had unsettled republics: the problem of the few and the many.⁶¹

According to Aristotle, in all political regimes, chronic tension between the few who are rich and powerful and the many who are poor and weak is the ultimate cause of all revolutions of all kinds. Each side provides plausible reasons for the other side to be offended. Charity, or the active love for one another, as the basis of political society overcomes this discord and was the basis of Winthrop's sermon to the passengers of the *Arabella*. Nature did teach, he said, that we were all equal, made in the image of God, and Christians therefore should do good to all—a precept that touches every member of political society, Christian or not. Winthrop, the founder of republican America, was reading from the same textbook as Saint Leo the Great, pope and founder of the *respublica christiana*, who preached the same to the Roman people in the fifth century.

Shaped by the precepts of their religion to which they were devoted, the people of New England, Thomas Jefferson acknowledged, were respectful of the liberties belonging to others, which was not true of the southern character.⁶² The character of the New England people was ideal for sustaining republican government and the opposite of the default character of mankind in which violent disregard for the rights of others predominates.

Conclusion

Is America a Christian nation? Our Constitution does not explicitly favor Christianity and in fact protects worshippers of all religions. But what other religion welcomes citizens of latitudinarian belief? To what antecedent should we attribute protections of religious conscience? Drawing from Christian scripture, Saint Augustine (among others) had said that coercion cannot compel belief. Alcuin of York quoted Augustine in a letter to Charlemagne to explain to the king why he should use persuasion instead of force to convert the newly conquered Saxons and Avars. These are the same arguments prefixing and justifying the Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia in 1786: “Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments...are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions...”⁶³

Our republican Founding did not favor Christianity, but Christianity favored our republican Founding. Subtract the faith and the support is gone. Perhaps the Founders took the achievements of Christianity too much for granted, gave too much credit to the Enlightenment for the progress of liberty, or assumed that the faith would remain strong without greater intervention. We today cannot afford those illusions. Our forebears enjoyed

a fuller account of moral capital created by Christianity, and that account is clearly spent down. Atheists, agnostics, and the religiously indifferent might celebrate the evanescence of Christianity, but if they love their liberty, in the difficulties ahead that we all might face, they might discover a new appreciation for its Author and learn to pray for a genuine revival of Christian faith.

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