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THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANITY
AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

The relation of Christianity and liberal democracy is generally assumed to be harmonious in the United States, especially when compared to many European nations where the relation seems hostile or indifferent. Indeed, most Americans think that an essential harmony between religion and democracy is a long-standing tradition that can be traced back to the American founding fathers in the eighteenth century. European observers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, also noticed that Christianity and liberal democracy were mutually supportive in America, in contrast to France, where the two had settled into a relation of mutual hostility.

The idea of essential harmony was developed theologically in the twentieth century by influential Christian leaders such as John Courtney Murray, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, and Jacques Maritain. They led the way in persuading Christian believers that their faith is naturally allied to liberal democracy rather than to the old regimes of monarchy and theocracy or to the modern totalitarian regimes of communism and fascism.

These theologians were "Christian democrats," one might say, who worked out a logic of harmony between Christianity and modern liberal democracy consisting of three propositions: (1) Christian ethics teaches universal love; (2) universal love implies recognizing the inherent dignity of every person; and (3) the dignity of all persons entails respect for their inviolable natural or human rights in a democratic society.

Most Christians today believe in this "logic of harmony" and even in a kind of moral equivalence between Christianity and liberal democracy, which they see as two sides of the same coin – the sacred and secular sides of human dignity.

While accepting the "logic of harmony" as a matter of principle and even as a matter of hope and prayer, many of the same Christians have nagging doubts about the long-term prospects for harmony or compatibility. They are alarmed by signs of growing hostility in the surrounding culture to important principles of Christian life – for example, in the legalization of abortion rights, in the growing pressure for gay marriage, in a culture of individualism emphasizing unfettered self-expression, in a culture of materialism that creates an obsessive consumer-entertainment society where twenty percent of Americans are left chronically poor and underinsured, in court decisions shrinking the role of religion in public life, and in subtle but significant cultural shifts such as replacing the greeting "Merry Christmas" with "Happy Holidays" in public schools and shopping malls.

Further doubts are caused by looking at trends in other Western democracies. Although the United States is still a religious country, nations that were once vitally Christian – Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries – are now virtually de-Christianized or "post-Christian." France has even taken the step of passing a law banning displays in public schools of crosses, yamulkes, and Muslim girls' headscarves in order to guarantee its "laicized" state. Will America follow Canada and Western Europe in becoming a totally secular society? Are those countries an image of the American future?

While many people think that America is different, and will resist the secularizing trends of Canada and Western Europe, others are not so sure anymore. At a minimum, Christian believers are confronted with a puzzling and disturbing dilemma. On the one hand, Christianity looks like it has a natural affinity with liberal democracy because the two ideals seem to share the common values of respect for the inherent rights and dignity of individuals, equality of all peoples, freedom of conscience, and welfare for the poor. On the other hand, democracy based on natural rights or human rights – which is what we mean by liberal democracy – combined with a culture of materialism and social welfare, are producing societies that are evermore secular and even anti-Christian. Such trends imply hostility rather than harmony between Christian faith and modern liberal democracy. So which is the correct view: harmony or hostility?

One might answer that a stark either/or choice between essential harmony and inevitable hostility are not the only options. Most practicing Christians probably place themselves somewhere in the middle of the debate, and the theologians and church leaders who are most vocal reject exclusive choices. They acknowledge the serious problems of modern societies, but they think that those problems are mainly a result of *false* theories of democracy and *false* theories of rights derived from the modern Enlightenment and from secular Liberalism – false theories which equate human dignity with personal autonomy and which justify democracy by ap-

peals to skepticism or moral relativism (the claim that nothing is objectively true, therefore democracy is best because it allows people to live as they please and to define reality as they wish). By contrast, theologians and church leaders argue that Christianity has its own version of democracy and rights – one that is not based on personal autonomy and moral relativism but on the dignity of the human person made in the image of God. This doctrine is called "Christian personalism" because it emphasizes the Christian idea of the dignity of the human person, which provides a religious alternative to secular Liberalism and the modern Enlightenment. Once Christian personalism is clearly and effectively taught, these theologians argue, the moral and spiritual problems of democracy can be overcome. We will then have a "democracy of the person", or a genuine Christian democracy where rights are used properly and morally rather than destructively and immorally.

In my view, this alternative is a plausible reply to the critics. It is also one that I find admirable, not least because it is reflected in the social teaching of many churches, including my own, the Roman Catholic Church. In the final analysis, however, I believe that Christian personalism's teaching about democracy and human rights is based on wishful thinking because the problems go much deeper than false theories or misunderstandings. To explain why this is so, I will explore two major issues in order to show that there is something inherently subversive in the concept of "rights" (regardless of the foundation) that causes them to undermine Christian life, and that there is something inherently corrosive in the "mass culture" of democracy that explains why religion is always fighting losing battles against the social forces of today. I will conclude with an appeal to St. Augustine's doctrine of the Two Cities in order to suggest a possible solution – a way of living as a citizen of two worlds that recognizes the inherent tensions between Christianity and democratic citizenship while preserving a fundamental loyalty to the American way of life.[1]

Problems with Rights

The first step is to examine theories of "rights" and to ask if they are compatible or incompatible with Christianity. As a preliminary observation, I would note that most of the Christian theologians of the past did not develop theories of rights. The greatest of them – St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Richard Hooker, and the American Puritans – had powerful notions of justice derived from natural law and divine law which enabled them to oppose tyranny, oppression, and exploitation. But their notions of justice and higher law were not the same things as theories of rights. Nor am I convinced by the impressive scholarly

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[1] The argument that follows was first presented as The Witherspoon Fellowship Lecture and published by the Family Research Council as "Natural Rights and the American Experiment: Some Problems for Christian Theology" 2004, No. 32, March 12.

work of Brian Tierney, which purports to show that twelfth-century cannon law doctrines of "subjective right" were forerunners of modern natural rights because they referred to powers or faculties in the soul of the "subject."[2] Despite the reference to subjective powers, these and other traditional Christian doctrines were different from the natural or human rights of today. Why?

The answer, I believe, is that rights are not merely powers in the soul, but claims against external authority, either as protections for personal freedom from the arbitrary power of the state or as entitlements from the state for social welfare benefits. Neither of these basic senses of rights – as protections or as entitlements – is easily squared with Christian doctrine. Let me offer five reasons why theories of rights were not part of traditional Christian theology and why rights are problematic for Christians to embrace today.

In the first place, Christianity's foundation on divine revelation implies a duty to accept transcendent truth from a higher authority that is independent of any claims of rights. The Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican churches, in particular, require acceptance of authoritative pronouncements about revealed truth by the church hierarchy in its capacity as successor to the Apostles. The teaching authority of the hierarchical church – based on the claim that bishops and patriarchs are successors of the Apostles – is crucial for the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches in defining the doctrines of the true faith. Even those Protestants who reject the Apostolic Succession and allow individuals to interpret Scripture in congregational churches guided by the Holy Spirit have developed means for protecting the true faith. All Christians, in other words, claim divine authority for institutional churches to promote orthodoxy and to suppress heresy.

Hence, it is not easy for any devout Christian to accept a blanket right of individual conscience, especially if it leads to a society indifferent to God or to a society in which bizarre New Age cults proliferate and the true faith is marginalized under the pretext of personal interpretation. While defending orthodoxy does not automatically require a confessional Christian state or theocracy, it is not easy to square with an unqualified right of conscience either. In fact, many of the strongest religious arguments for rights of conscience developed by modern Christian theologians are based on duties to seek the truth freely, in an un-coerced fashion. But these arguments for freely chosen faith mean that claims of orthodoxy and claims of personal conscience are left in an unresolved standoff that gives error the same rights as truth. What should Christians do if the Christian faith becomes an endangered species in a modern society?

Christian believers may find protection in the rights of conscience against a hostile secular culture that treats their words as 'hate speech,' but those very same rights often contribute to the secularization of culture over the long term. The implication is that authoritative claims about the true faith are not automatically in

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[2] See: B. Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies in Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150–1625*, Atlanta 1997.

harmony with the rights of individual conscience and may often be in tension with them.

A second problem with rights (following the same logic) is that Christianity puts duties to God and duties to neighbor before any claims of rights; and Christian believers cannot easily accept the proposition that a natural right to pursue happiness as one sees fit should take precedence over the exalted duties to God and man. After all, the Bible uses the language of divine law rather than the language of rights to express morality and justice; and the divine law includes the old law or Mosaic code in the Old Testament, which Christians generally reduce to the Ten Commandments along with the two great commands of love in the New Testament: loving God with all one's mind, heart, and soul and loving one's neighbor as one's self.

It is not surprising, then, that the Bible gives us a list of commands rather than a list of rights – the Ten Commandments rather than the Bill of Ten Rights. A more subtle point is that the biblical commands of the Mosaic code which forbid murder and stealing are prohibitions on the perpetrators of misdeed rather than protections for the victims of misdeeds; the perpetrators are liable to the death penalty in many cases and are highly restricted in their use of property (forbidden, for example, to lend money at interest to the poor) – which indicates there is not a natural right to self-preservation or a natural right to own and freely use one's property. Even the command of Jesus to love one's neighbor as one's self is not necessarily the same as respecting the rights of others – if, for example, loving one's neighbors means imposing on them for their own good in order to save their souls or to steer them away from sin (as we would wish for ourselves). In other words, divine law commands duties to others and reciprocal obligations among human beings rather than rights claims. The commands do not necessarily rule out civil laws protecting people's rights, but they do not require them either; and they may even require subordinating rights to duties in civil law and in social practice for the sake of higher goods.[3]

In the third place, the Christian notion of original sin implies distrust of weak and fallible human beings to use their rights properly. Belief in original sin instills in Christians a keen sense of how freedom can go awry, and implies that any notion of political freedom must be a conditional good rather than an absolute good. Original sin means weak and corruptible human beings need curbs on freedom by social and political institutions, including the legislation of morality by the state in certain areas of life. Of course, many Christian theologians maintain that the corruption of man by original sin does not obliterate his rational nature and free-will; but this implies even greater responsibilities for the state – not only to suppress vice and sin, but also to perfect the rational souls of citizens by inculcating moral and intellectual virtues. Such political responsibilities are hard to reconcile with protections for individual rights because they imply the need for institutions of civic and moral education that mold the characters of citizens. Curbing vice and promoting

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[3] See: E. L. F o r t i n, *Is Liberal Democracy Really Christian?*, "Free Inquiry" 1984, Vol. 4, Spring, p. 34.

virtue by regulating alcohol, drugs, prostitution, gambling, and public indecency are often at odds with personal rights and liberties.

Those responsibilities also indicate why traditional Christianity places more emphasis on "inner freedom" – the freedom of the soul from sinful desires – than on "external freedom" – the freedom from external political controls, including the controls of a repressive state or the institution of slavery. Thus, when St. Paul spoke of Christian freedom, he meant inner freedom, not the external freedom from the state protected by natural rights. To the surprise of modern readers of the New Testament, Paul could say (without contradicting himself): "for freedom Christ has set us free ... do not submit to the yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1) and "slaves, obey ... your earthly masters" (Col. 3:22). Paul is not advocating or endorsing slavery in his admonitions to obey earthly masters; but he is saying something that is hard for modern Christians to understand. He is acknowledging that inner freedom from sin is more important than external freedom from oppression, making spiritual freedom a higher priority than claiming one's rights.

Fourth, Christianity, and especially the Catholic tradition, elevates the common good above the rights of individuals and even above the rights of groups. Catholic teaching about the family and man's social nature also conflict with the individualism and privacy of rights. Traditionally, Catholicism did not define the common good as simply the condition for individual development (as it does today somewhat naively in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church;* see paragraphs 1906-09). Rather, it viewed the common good in corporate fashion, embodied in structured social groups and upholding "unity in peace" that promotes the harmony of social classes and inculcates moral virtues that perfect the rational soul and promote civic friendship ("solidarity," in today's terms). The Catholic conception of the common good is best captured by the concept of corporate hierarchy rather than by conditions for the exercise of individual rights. This conception explains why so many Christian theologians of the past could oppose tyranny and oppression in the name of justice – which they conceived as the corporate good of all classes of people in their proper place in the social order – without embracing human rights as such.

The Christian notion of the common good also explain why today's battles over the family, and especially over abortion and gay marriage, so often pit Christian defenders of traditional family values against political activists waving the banner of equal rights. Traditional Christians understand the family as a corporate body of reciprocal obligations sanctioned by natural law and divine law for its special common good – the union in sacramental love of a male and a female for the procreation and rearing of children. By contrast, 'progressives' see the 'family' as a social construct of autonomous individuals claiming equal rights, including a woman's right to choose an abortion. Yet, the Christian view of the family as a natural and divinely ordained union is incomprehensible in terms of rights; and once Christians embrace the logic of rights, they can hardly stop the culture of

rights from undermining the traditional family and redefining it according to the rights of personal desire (including the desire for gay unions, polygamy, group marriage, or whatever else people may feel). These contemporary debates about the family highlight the tensions between Christianity and human rights more clearly than any other social issue.

A fifth problem with rights concerns the Christian teaching about charity. The essence of Christian charity (agape) is sacrificial love, and the ideal of sacrificial love makes the whole notion of rights seem selfish. Many have observed that the culture of rights, when deeply entrenched, creates societies in the modern Western world where people feel that they are owed something when they can declare, "I have my rights" (meaning, my entitlements) and that they are victims if their entitlements are not granted. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn has said critically of the Western concept of rights: "'Human rights' are a fine thing, but how can we be sure that our rights do not expand at the expense of others? … Human freedom, in contrast, includes voluntary self-limitation for the sake of others."[4]

Stated more precisely, human rights are a two-edged sword: They are noble and glorious when used against real tyranny and real oppression (against the Hitlers, Stalins, and Saddam Husseins of the world). But rights are base, selfish, and destructive when they are used against the legitimate authority of parents, teachers, clergymen, and public officials or when used against traditional morality, as they often are in modern society. Although rights have horizontal limits ("my rights end where your rights begin"), they have no guidelines in themselves to distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate use of rights – for example, between the rights of Christian marriage and the rights of gay marriage, between the right to choose an abortion and the right to life, between true and false rights. These distinctions cannot be found in rights themselves and must be sought in an objective hierarchy of goods that explains how rights must be properly used in order to be legitimate. Hence, from a Christian perspective, rights are conditional goods: their value depends on the ends for which they are used, which means that rights are not rights, strictly speaking, but rather conditional goods subservient to higher goods.

Furthermore, Christians (especially Catholics) cannot accept the premise of the natural freedom of the autonomous self that underlies philosophical doctrines of rights. The most influential doctrines of rights emerged from the great liberal philosophers of the Enlightenment – Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, Isaiah Berlin, and John Rawls. In one fashion or another, they argue that human beings are "born free"; and they posit the existence of a state of nature or an "original position" which proclaims human autonomy at the expense of human dependence on God and personal autonomy before obligations to the common good of society and to fellow human beings. Such doctrines also deny natural sociality as well as natural or divinely ordained hierarchies. Natural freedom is antithetical to the divinely ordained hierar-

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[4] A. S o l z h e n i t s y n, *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals*, New York 1989, p. 54–55.

chy of the Church and to a natural hierarchy in the family; it also undermines claims of those who are wise and virtuous to have a legitimate title to rule over those who are less wise and less virtuous. Since these notions are inherent in Christian teachings about social obligation and authority, a Christian doctrine of natural or human rights cannot begin from the assumption of an autonomous self in a state of nature or an original position. Christian theories of rights, insofar as they are plausible, must be derived from duties, hierarchies, and prior human goods – derivations that raise the question if they are still rights at all, rather than conditional grants from a higher authority to use freedom for the specific ends of man as a creature of God living in the fallen world.

These five objections to Christian theories of human rights are weighty objections; and they leave one wondering what Christians should think about theories of rights today, especially when those theories have been incorporated uncritically into much of mainstream theology. The lesson that I would draw from this is that Christianity strongly opposes tyranny and supports ideals of justice that include a notion of freedom; but the Christian view of freedom cannot be properly understood as a matter of rights. Instead, Christian freedom must be understood as the "freedom-to-do-good" or "freedom-for-the good" – it means that freedom requires cultural conditions that guide and direct choices to the true ends of man, to "the whole truth about God and man," in the words of Pope John Paul II. This conception of Christian freedom is closer to the idea of "ordered liberty" in the tradition of Edmund Burke than to the idea of natural rights in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson. As Burke said, the only kind of freedom or liberty worthy of a civilized society is "a liberty connected with order and virtue … [and that] cannot exist at all without them."[5]

If this is so, then the challenge for responsible Christians is to find a way of limiting the power of the state to avoid tyranny and to promote freedom as ordered liberty, without creating a neutral zone of private rights that allows people to do whatever they want within the boundaries of the law (where "anything goes" that is not illegal) and where the boundaries of the law are continuously pushed back to allow for ever greater permissive freedom. In short, what we need are constitutional limits on state power that provide safeguards against tyranny, without promoting a culture and legal system of rights that continuously subverts the true ends of man as a spiritual and rational being. How this goal might be attained in practice is a whole other subject; but let me suggest here that it could be achieved by a Christian theory of constitutional government, such as the one that I outline in my book, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*. The gist of the argument is that constitutional government can be established on the Christian distinction between God's realm and Caesar's realm, because this distinction implies that Caesar's realm – the realm of the coercive state – is secondary to God's realm yet distinguished

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[5] E. Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, [in:] *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. I. Kramnick, New York 1999, p. 480.

from God's realm, making the state an inherently limited and imperfect authority that provides for the temporal common good. This understanding of "constitutional government under God" is based on an objective hierarchy of ends which limits the coercive state and permits an orderly notion of liberty without opening up a neutral zone of private rights that so often undermines traditional morality in modern societies. A Christian theory of constitutional government under God is better than the liberal theory because it avoids the pitfalls of rights and offers the benefits of "constitutionalism without liberalism."[6]

Problems with Democracy

If these are some of the reasons why rights are difficult to reconcile with Christianity, then what are some of the problems inherent in democracy? We need to be honest and ask this question as well: Is democracy really compatible with Christianity? Merely by raising the question today, one might be accused of subverting American ideals and of disturbing the complacency of Christians who accept the compatibility of democracy and Christianity as a matter of principle. They genuinely believe the famous statement of Henri Bergson – often fondly quoted by Jacques Maritain – that "democracy is evangelical." The statement implies that modern democracy is not a pagan idea derived from the Greeks or a secular idea derived from the French Revolution, but a Christian idea inspired by the Gospel – by the evangelical message of universal love and the equal dignity of all God's children.[7] The political implication is that democracy is the only form of government consistent with the dignity of man in his full moral maturity and the only legitimate political authority that a Christian can support – a development of the gospel of Christ into "the gospel of democracy."

In reflecting on these contemporary views, we should be reminded that this was not the view of the great Christian theologians of the past, nor even of Christ in the Gospels. The strangeness of Christ's view of politics was that he preached universal love and charity, especially for the poor and humble, but he seemed to express no preference for one form of government over another when he said, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." The simplest meaning of Christ's statement is to obey the powers that be, regardless of the form of government, as long as the established rulers do not exceed their proper limits as temporal powers by trying to usurp God's authority or by claiming to be divinities themselves. For centuries, most Christian theologians and church leaders interpreted this to mean that a variety of political regimes could be legitimate as long as the state was viewed as a secondary power compared to the church and as

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[6] R. P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World*, Notre Dame 2001, see chapt. 4 & 5, p. 183–191, 203–224.

[7] J. Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, New York 1944, p. 42–43.

long as it satisfied certain requirements of the temporal common good, which usually led them to prefer monarchy or mixed constitutions to democracy or republicanism on prudential grounds. Is there an inherent problem with democracy that prevented traditional theologians from regarding it as the best choice for Christianity?

The answer is, yes, there is an inherent problem which is usually forgotten today by enthusiasts for "the gospel of democracy." The problem is that democracy is driven by the demand for equality, which can be healthy and just in certain respects but which also has an inevitable tendency toward "leveling" – toward abolishing all hierarchies or all distinctions between high and low in society and in the souls of democratic citizens. Democracies tend to view all lifestyles as equally valid and to treat all hierarchies as illegitimate, whether they are arbitrary or just. Yet, hierarchies of a certain kind are absolutely necessary for spiritual life because hierarchies elevate the soul above mundane concerns and provide institutional support for transcendent goods and high culture.

This crucial point can be understood by reading the classical Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who taught that the "regime in the city shapes the regime in the soul," and that both regimes needed hierarchies to promote virtue – meaning the rule of the higher parts of the soul over the lower parts of the soul. This point can also be learned by reading St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, and many of the American Puritans – all of whom had a healthy respect for hierarchies in the city and in the soul. It can also be rediscovered by reading the great social critics of the modern democratic age whom I often refer to as the theorists of "mass society." At the top of the list of these powerful social critics are Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ortega y Gasset, as well as the Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard, whose neglected essay *The Present Age* (1846) is a powerful warning about the leveling tendencies of mass democracy and the degrading effects of mass culture on the individual – especially on the individual's spiritual life.[8]

These critics of democratic life remind us that, whatever virtues democracy may have as form of government that protects people from dictatorship or tyranny, it has within it the potential for its own kind of "social tyranny." For democracy inevitably carries with it the forces of mass culture, which lower the tone of society by glorifying the mundane tastes of the common man and by replacing the aspirations of "high culture" with the pleasures of "popular culture" – lowering the aims of life from classical beauty, heroic virtues, and otherworldly transcendence to the pursuits of work, material consumption, and entertainment. In the process, artistic and religious culture are lowered from standards set by Bach, Mozart, Gregorian chant, and the Latin liturgy to the standards of Hollywood, the Beatles, and hippie-guitar masses without telling people that their souls are being transformed and degraded in the process. The tearing down of high culture in the name of popu-

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[8] See: S. Kierkegaard, *The Present Age: The Individual and the Public*, [in:] *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. R. Bretall, Princeton 1946, p. 258–269.

lar culture also has a strange and perverse effect on the souls of the educated and cultural elites, who lose confidence in themselves and who then become even more energetic "subverters" and "deconstructors" of high culture than the general public – giving us a modern elite culture of the "avant-garde" that is often more degraded and leveling than the tastes of the common people.

These problems are extremely hard to alert people to because mass culture or popular culture seems harmless at first glance. But its total effect is a serious kind of evil (the "evil of banality," if I may reverse Hannah Arendt's famous phrase) that works by trivializing high things that ought to be treated as sacred or noble and by lowering them to cuteness and sentimentality and finally by banishing them forever from human consciousness. This ultimately reduces life to a one-dimensional materialism and animal existence that undermines human dignity and eventually leads to "the abolition of man," in the words of C.S. Lewis. We see this in Western Europe today, where culture is formed by the entitlements of the social welfare state and the mass tastes of consumer-entertainment societies without any higher conception of man or higher conception of man's spiritual nature being present anymore. The cultural revolution has reduced many Europeans to a condition of degradation where material security is the highest or only priority – where they no longer want to work or to marry or to have children or to go to church or to produce high art or even to fight for their survival against deadly enemies. Is such a life worthy of man? Is it a life worth living?

From this travesty of life, we can see that it is not harmless when high culture is changed by the pressures of secular democracy to abolish sacred rituals – when, for example, the Catholic Mass is transformed from a high mode of solemn celebration of sacred mysteries to the low mode of a children's mass or a folk-guitar mass that feels like a school play or a protest rally, removing, in effect, the sense of the real presence of the divine from worship. Nor is it harmless when Christian charity is reduced to being a nice person who never opposes alternative lifestyles in the name of Truth or who is afraid to impose on others in order to save them from sin and error. And it is certainly not harmless when the hierarchies of the Church are treated as merely symbolic rather than as authoritative structures. In fact, one can trace the devastating scandals of sex abuse in the Catholic Church to this cause – to the influence of American popular culture on the Catholic Church which let the 1960's sexual revolution into the seminaries and then treated the effects as harmless pleasures because the bishops of the Church suffered from a crisis of confidence which prevented them acting in their authoritative roles as moral disciplinarians and defenders of orthodoxy. Many bishops are still afraid of appearing too authoritarian to uphold unpopular Church teachings in a popular culture.

All of these examples illustrate why Christians are so frustrated in the contemporary world: Instead of shaping the surrounding culture, they are being shaped by it because they have come to believe they share the same democratic values as the culture and that democracy can do no harm simply because it is sometimes an

ally against (genuine) tyranny and injustice. Yet, the simple truth is that the true Church is not a democracy governed by public opinion polls, and Christianity is more of a hierarchical religion – guided by a hierarchy of being in this world and the next – than a democratic religion as many believe today.

Before turning to possible solutions, let me summarize the problems that we have raised for Christian doctrine and social teachings. First, natural rights or human rights are a problem because they carry subversive premises that may be used nobly and justly as weapons against tyranny, but they are just as frequently used ignobly and unjustly to undermine legitimate authority in the family, Church, and society. In other words, rights are nearly impossible to control and to subordinate to the higher goods that they must serve in order to be legitimate. Second, democracy is driven by the demand for equality which gives all people the opportunity to participate; but it also levels the surrounding culture to the lowest common denominator of mass taste, and it causes the educated elites, who ought to resist mass culture, to treat all aspirations to high culture with irony or contempt. There even occurs the strange reversal of roles where the educated elites become the great "deconstructors" of high culture while the less-educated masses preserve a sense of reverence for the monuments of high culture. Thus, the common man still feels awe when seeing Michelangelo's *David* or *Pietà*, whereas the educated art critic only talks about Michelangelo's transgendered sexual identity or seeks to replace these beautiful and inspiring examples of high art, which actually appeal to all classes of people, with ironic art or gimmickry.

Some Sobering Conclusions

If these are problems inherent in rights and in democracy, and if they are as serious as I claim that they are, then what can we do in America today? We are in a difficult position, because rejecting or opposing these principles would seem to make us traitors to our country or, at least, to make Christian life hard to live without withdrawing from mainstream culture and living like Orthodox Jews or the Amish and Mennonites, who live like strangers in a strange land. All that I can offer here are a few suggestions that might help people cope with the difficulties of the current predicament.

In the first place, we must be aware of the problems and give up the illusion of automatic harmony between Christianity and the American way of life. Interestingly, the American founding fathers were aware of many of the problems – they were certainly aware of the subversive nature of individual rights as well as the leveling effects of democracy on culture. But, in my judgment, the American founders, in all their wisdom, did not make adequate provisions to stop the negative tendencies for future generations. They seemed to assume that proclaiming God-given natural rights in the Declaration of Independence – including the blanket right to

pursue happiness without specifying clearly the perverted possibilities of pursuing happiness – would be adequately channeled toward ordered and virtuous liberty by two countervailing forces: (1) the US Constitution, and its limitations on the power of the federal government, and (2) the cultural inheritance of Western civilization, including its classical and Christian notions of virtue and piety and its remnants of an aristocratic or high culture. They thought that these legal and cultural traditions would put sufficient restraints on natural rights and democracy, channeling them to higher goods and encouraging ordered liberty rather than disordered license.

In hindsight, the hope of the American founders appears to be naïve – a criticism that I learned from reading Robert Bork's *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*. Bork criticizes the founders for writing "blank checks" to Americans in the natural rights proclamations of the Declaration of Independence, and describes in detail the corrosive effects of rights-claims since the founding period 200 years ago. He makes a powerful case that the relentless chipping away of traditional constraints by the ever expanding demands of natural rights and democratic equality has led us to the radical egalitarianism and permissive freedom of today.[9]

Thus, the finely-tuned balance of many of the American founders has been upset by the dominance of rights-claims. For example, John Witherspoon was a Calvinist preacher, Scottish gentleman, president of Princeton University, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. The greatness of men like Witherspoon was their ability to hold together a synthesis of diverse elements, including the Calvinist-Christian doctrine of original sin, the Scottish Enlightenment doctrine of moral sense, John Locke's natural rights and social contract theory, and his own personal example of being a Christian gentleman. Today, we can see the synthesis unraveling over a two-hundred-year period under the subversive effect of rights and the leveling effects of democracy. The harmony of the founding generation was only temporary, and it unraveled more or less inevitably under the pressures of the American regime (though one could argue that historical contingencies also influenced the outcome, like the influx of German idealistic philosophy in the nineteenth century and the reinterpretation of the Declaration's natural rights as a progressive ideal begun by Abraham Lincoln and radicalized by later generations). However one might explain the unraveling of the American founders' grand synthesis, we need to be aware of the inherent tensions and conflicts of Christianity and liberal democracy rather than assume an automatic harmony.

In the second place, we need to seek a perspective outside of modern thinking to understand the nature of those conflicts, and this perspective is best provided by St. Augustine's doctrine of the Two Cities. According to St. Augustine, God has ordained two realms for man to live in: the city of God and the city of man (or the heavenly city and the earthly city). The Two Cities are distinct but not entirely sepa-

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[9] R. H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, New York 1996.

rate from each other – with the city of God roughly corresponding to the spiritual realm of charity, holiness, and grace (including the institutional church on earth as well as the communion of saints in heaven) and the city of man roughly corresponding to the temporal realm of the state, economic and social arrangements, the military, and the practical affairs of nations and civilizations. While the Two Cities overlap in some areas, they are distinct enough for us to recognize their different ends and destinies. They remind us that the two realms will always be in tension because they are based on two different kinds of love, the love of God versus the love of the world, which will never be in harmony until the fallen world is transformed by the Second Coming at the end of time.

When applied to contemporary America, St. Augustine's doctrine of the Two Cities teaches us that, instead of expecting harmony, we must live with the enduring tensions of Christian faith and American citizenship without demanding an inner affinity or moral equivalence between the two. Nevertheless, we can develop a prudent alliance between Christianity and liberal democracy by viewing democracy and human rights as conditional goods subservient to higher goods and continuously striving to dominate the surrounding culture so that the pursuit of happiness is properly understood as the pursuit of rational and spiritual perfection rather than any lifestyle that people happen to find pleasing to themselves. This perspective leads to a posture of resistance to trends which radicalize rights and democratic leveling and of promoting trends which favor high culture.

Following this logic, the answer to the question posed at the beginning – Is Christianity essentially harmonious with modern liberal democracy? – will have to be qualified: it is a "no" and a "yes." As a matter of principle, the answer is no: there is no natural alliance between Christianity and liberal democracy based on shared conceptions of rights, dignity, universal love, or progress toward the coming of the kingdom of God because the two cities understand these terms differently. However, as a matter of prudence or practical judgment, the answer can be yes: Christians can be loyal to liberal democracy as long as rights are carefully controlled by a dominant culture that directs them to the true hierarchy of ends and as long as we remember that we are not closer to the kingdom of God today than in the early Roman Empire just because we have democracy, human rights, and the United Nations. Such loyalty is akin to the real and passionate patriotism that Christians have traditionally felt for America and its blessings of ordered liberty under God, but it is and must remain a conditional patriotism that never confuses the Gospel of Christ with the gospel of democracy.

As Charles Taylor remarks in his recent book, *A Catholic Modernity?*, the present age is difficult to judge because it is infused with certain Christian values in the widespread recognition of our common humanity and respect for the dignity of individuals in various international agencies.

At the same time, the present age is post-Christian because it has performed a "spiritual lobotomy" on modern man by cutting out the highest part of the human

soul, the part that longs for eternity and for spiritual transcendence of the here and now.[10]

Instead of surrendering to these trends, we must resist them by living with the enduring and irreducible tensions of the Two Cities – acting in the earthly city while glimpsing the heavenly city, and acknowledging that modern democratic culture makes glimpsing the heavenly city harder than in past ages due to exaggerated claims about the "the gospel of democracy." This means we must live with dual citizenship, as Christians and as Americans, without expecting a convergence between the two realms until the end of time. Though sobering, this is ultimately a hopeful thought.

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[10] Ch. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? The Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. J. L. Heft, S. M., New York 1999, p. 19–26.