

DEBATING VIRTUE:
THE AMERICAN PROJECT AND THE AMERICAN SOUL

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While our Country remains untainted with the Principles and manners, which are now producing desolation in so many Parts of the World: while she continues Sincere and incapable of insidious and impious Policy: We shall have the Strongest Reason to rejoice in the local destination assigned Us by Providence. But should the People of America, once become capable of that deep simulation towards one another and towards foreign nations, which assumes the Language of Justice and moderation while it is practicing Iniquity and Extravagance; and displays in the most captivating manner the charming Pictures of Candour frankness & sincerity while it is rioting in rapine and Insolence: this Country will be the most miserable Habitation in the World. Because We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition Revenge or Galantry, would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

—John Adams, October 11, 1798

What is the role of virtue in the American project? The longstanding formulation of the role of virtue in America is one rooted in Western Christian notions that a nation pursuing liberty and equality must be supported by a moral or virtuous people which in turn must be supported by religion. In America however, religion was rooted in claims of religious liberty as opposed to a national established church.¹ Thus, virtue and a virtuous people were key to maintaining an ordered liberty that is rooted in natural limits and supported by a generally religious population.

Modernity however birthed metaphysical skepticism which in turn led to notions of liberty that increasingly didn't recognize limits or simply lost sight of any grounds for limits. Such notions of liberty loosened the social and political role for virtue and in turn religion. The term *virtue* rooted in an objective moral order steadily fell into decline and was replaced by the more modern term *values* which are inherently subjective. Modern thought encouraged the linguistic and cultural reformulation of the American Order along increasingly secular lines.

For example, esteemed Harvard professor Stephen Pinker argues that religion, and by extension *virtue*, is an obstacle to human progress and human flourishing.² In order to provide an “ought” (or ethical ground) for the “is” of scientific observation and innovation Pinker turns to the concept of “humanism” which provides a “non-supernatural basis for meaning and ethics” or as he terms it “good without God.”³ Rather than embracing objective virtues for an ethical structure Pinker relies on the language of the Humanist manifesto, which declares, “[e]thical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.”⁴ For Pinker the American project, and its governing institutions, were built by human design or *technologies* “designed to enhance the welfare of citizens”, thus the Declaration of Independence is a wholly Enlightenment expression of human ideals and progress.⁵ *Virtue* in the traditional sense, is not a visible part of Pinker's vision. Pinker is correct when he points out that the Enlightenment project has produced

¹ Although there establishments at the state level.

² Steven Pincker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, (Alane Lane, 2018)

³ Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 410.

⁴ Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 411.

⁵ Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 12

human societies that are healthier, wealthier, and more peaceful than ever before in human history. The Enlightenment narrative explicitly sees religion (and by extension) virtue as negative forces that impede the onward and upward progress of modern society. The assumption is that freedom, justice, human rights, and all that the modern West stands for, were purely products of the modern world and the world in which we live will sustain itself and thrive without the regressive influence of religion and virtue.

While Pinker may be optimistic about the fruits and future of the Enlightenment, others are more tempered and are realistic about the religious roots of secular modernity. Increasingly even fellow atheists such as celebrated historian and scholar Tom Holland argue that one can't easily disentangle modern culture and values from their source, "... So now are many in the west reluctant to contemplate that their values, and even their very lack of belief, might be traceable back to Christian origins" and "[t]o live in a western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions."⁶ For Holland, the attempt to create a post hoc narrative about the nature and sustainability of secularized humanism is fool's errand,

The humanist assumption that atheism and liberalism go together, was just that: an assumption. Without the biblical story that God had created man in his own image to draw upon, the reverence of humanists for their own species, risked seeming mawkish, and shallow. What basis -- other than mere sentimentality -- what is there to argue for it? Perhaps, as the humanist manifesto declared, through "the application of the methods of science". Yeah, this was barely any less a myth than Genesis.... It derived, not from the viability of such a project, but from medieval theology.⁷

Humanism for Holland was not rooted in objective science but human myth and self-interest, "It was not truth that science offered moralists, but a mirror. Racists identified it with racist values: liberals with liberal values."⁸ So for all of the talk, by the likes of Pinker, of replanting Western culture in "scientific values," for Holland, liberal Western culture and freedom were merely subjective products of history, "The primary dogma of humanism -- 'that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and concern for others' -- found no more corroboration in science, than did the dogma of the Nazis, that anyone not fit for life should be exterminated."⁹ From Holland's vantage point, rationalists like Pinker fail to realize that *humanism* is a social construct from start to finish and its belief in the objectivity of *humanism* is merely a human conceit born of historical artifice, "The wellspring of humanist values lay not in reason, not in evidence-based thinking, but in history."¹⁰ History and culture were the true source of humanistic values, and this was a history deeply impacted by Christianity. According to Holland then, "Nietzsche had foretold it all. God might be dead, but his shadow, immense and dreadful, continues to flicker even as his corpse lay cold."¹¹ Therefore, "[i]f secular humanism, derives, not from reason or from science, but from the distinctive course of Christianity's evolution -- a course, that, in the opinion of growing numbers in Europe and America, has left God dead -- then how are its values anything more than the shadow of a corpse? What are the foundations of

⁶ Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. (New York, Basic Books 2019), 15.

⁷ Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. (New York, Basic Books 2019), 538.

⁸ Holland, *Dominion*, 538.

⁹ Holland, *Dominion*, 538.

¹⁰ Holland, *Dominion*, 538.

¹¹ Holland, *Dominion*, 538.

its morality, if not a myth?”¹² Thus, the moral order birthed by Christianity and Christian culture are the historical roots of the West and that fact isn’t likely to change soon and a distinctive Christian culture (even very secularized strains of it) will remain in place for some time.

And yet, despite the prominence of Christianity in the West, Holland simply cannot bring himself to believe in the truths of the faith that has produced and sustained our culture, since ultimately, Christianity for Holland is just “a story told by a species that, as I knew from my own personal experience, cannot bear very much reality.”¹³ There are increasing numbers of intellectuals that occupy this strange modern existentialist space. For example, as Andrew Klavan shows, Italian philosopher and politician Marcello Pera a 2008 book, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians*, argues that “Without faith in the equality, dignity, liberty, and responsibility of all men—that is to say, without a religion of man as the son and image of God—liberalism cannot defend the fundamental and universal rights of human beings or hope that human beings can coexist in a liberal society. Basic human rights must be seen as a gift of God . . . and hence pre-political and non-negotiable.”¹⁴ As Klavan shows Pera is not alone. Agnostics Douglas Murray and Jordan Peterson, agree with Pera that to save Western culture, “we must live . . . as if God existed”.¹⁵ But none of these Western intellectuals of either the conservative or liberal stripe can quite bring themselves to actually truly believe. Tales of struggling with belief seem to be the result of the so called “acids of modernity” that have severely weakened the foundations for genuine belief and practice among a certain intellectual class of believers.

Ultimately, while both Pinker and Holland disagree on much they both weave narratives that leave little room for virtue. Virtue cannot play a vital role in American political culture because “virtues” rooted in an objective moral order are in the end just social constructs that are better termed subjective “values”. Values that are subject to change by a culture drifting on an ever changing current. Oh sure, values can be powerful but they are, in the end, merely social constructs and ultimately subject to change by human power exerted by human culture.

Another strain of intellectual does see a need for virtue but they see no provision for it in the modern American liberal order. Patrick Deneen in *Why Liberalism Failed* offers a powerful and penetrating rebuttal to optimism of the likes of Pinker.¹⁶ While he agrees with Pinker that the American Founding was a thoroughly modern Enlightenment project he is not so sanguine about the results.¹⁷ Where Pinker sees only progress and wealth and wants to celebrate, Deneen sees mostly alienation and spiritual malaise and condemns it. Deneen concedes that modern liberalism has provided much in the way of material wealth and progress but this has all been bought at the cost of America’s soul; what was “...supposed to allow us to transform our world is instead transforming us, making us into creatures to which many, if not most of us, have not given our “consent.”¹⁸ The modern state and liberal culture have made us into, “...increasingly separate, autonomous, nonrelational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone.” For Deneen, modern liberalism has replaced virtue with

¹² Holland, *Dominion*, 540. Holland acknowledges that a myth isn’t necessarily a lie but neither is it on the level of truth that science can provide.

¹³ Holland, *Dominion*, 537.

¹⁴ Andrew Klavan, *Can We Believe?* City Journal, 2019. <https://www.city-journal.org/article/can-we-believe>

¹⁵ Andrew Klavan, *Can We Believe?*

¹⁶ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (Yale, University Press, New Haven, CT, 2018)

¹⁷ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (Yale, University Press, New Haven, CT, 2018)

¹⁸ Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 16.

unrestrained personal autonomy and license. Where virtue is supposed to be a key component of citizenship and education, it has been replaced by the unbridled pursuit of pleasure and wealth.¹⁹

The American Founders by implication, were willing (or unwitting) accomplices to all of this. In essence, Deneen argues that the American Founding was birthed with a poison pill.²⁰ The American Founders were either closet metaphysical skeptics or unaware of the implications of their own modern thought.²¹ While Deneen gives a rich account of the need to cultivate virtue, in a healthy society, America at its origins was doomed to failure. Deneen argues that the thinkers who shaped America, such as John Locke, were essentially Hobbesian in nature and Founders such as James Madison in the Federalist Papers followed suit.²² In the end, where Pinker embraces the modern American Enlightenment Project Deneen openly rejects it, and with it, the American Founding. Deneen sees the importance of human virtue to the political project but finds its provision for cultivating virtue lacking.

For other scholars, casting America as a child of the Enlightenment is to fundamentally misunderstand the depth and history of its founding. For example, Robert Reilly offers a deliberate counter to Deneen and his characterization of the American Founding. Reilly would wholeheartedly agree with Deneen that the *acids of modernity* have undermined American culture and its political order; however, he does not agree the American Founding is the cause of this decline. Reilly traces the development of American political thought and institutions from ancient Greece and Rome, Jerusalem, through the Middle Ages, and the Reformation up until the present day. In Reilly's account, the American Founding is not simply a product of modern Enlightenment thought but a regime deeply rooted in the Western Christian tradition of natural law, reason, and government by consent of persons created in the image of God. For Reilly *virtue* is a vital element and key to sustaining American government as it is rooted in the very marrow of the Christian West. The Founding Fathers, "taught that freedom is not divorced from nature" rather "it is rooted in and limited by nature" and thus true freedom cannot be offered under the guise of unlimited autonomy. For Reilly and the Founders, "Virtue is conformity with what is naturally good. That is why freedom, rightly understood, is freedom to choose the good. It is not license or licentiousness...which is against nature."²³ While Deneen would agree with this view of virtue he would not agree that the Founders created a system supportive of this view. And yet, as Reilly shows, James Madison explicitly bases the American system on the necessity of virtue as stated in *Federalist* No. 55 "Republican government presupposes" enough "qualities" to sustain free government for where "there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government" then "nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another."²⁴ For the Founders then, and Reilly, "[o]nly a virtuous person is capable of rational consent, because only a virtuous person's reason is unclouded by the habitual rationalizations of vice. Vice inevitably infects the faculty of judgement."²⁵ Subjected to Reilly's analysis, Deneen's

¹⁹ Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 22 and 128.

²¹ Reilly makes this point clear in, *Fools or Scoundrels? A Response to Patrick Deneen*, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/10/20245/>

²² See Reilly's account in Robert Reilly, *America on Trial: A Defense of the Founding* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2020) 289.

²³ Reilly, *America on Trial*, 301.

²⁴ Reilly, *America on Trial*, 300-301.

²⁵ Reilly, *America on Trial*, 301.

portrayal of America as solely an Enlightenment project falls apart, “The United States bears the imprint of theological ideas” if you “[m]iss those ideas, . . . you miss the meaning of the Founding.”

Paul R. DeHart is another scholar who argues that accounts of the founding as a modern project are woefully deficient.²⁶ Reminiscent of Holland’s historical case, DeHart argues a philosophical one,

Thus, any sound understanding of Christianity in relation to antiquity or to the American order must hold two distinct claims in view. First, with classical pagan thought, Christianity holds that there are moral truths available to reason and prior to special revelation. Second, while affirming a natural law rationally accessible to all, Christianity also introduced ideas that reshaped the moral, social, and political landscape of the Greco-Roman world.²⁷

What the likes of Pinker and Deneen miss is that, “Modern ideas are often a secularization or distortion of Christian ideas or, at any rate, only intelligible in light of the Christian turn.”²⁸ For DeHart American Constitutionalism “may owe more to the Christian turn than to modernity . . . Put another way, what may matter most about the American constitutional order is that it stands downstream from the Christian turn.”²⁹ Furthermore, in his essay “Madisonian Thomism” and his book *Uncovering the Constitution’s Moral Design*, Paul DeHart shows how the U.S. Constitution is only intelligible within in the metaphysical realism and the core philosophical tenets of Western Christian thought.³⁰

Likewise, Kody Cooper and Justin Dyer show how the American founding drew heavily on the Classical Christian tradition to provide the resources Deneen thinks are lacking. As Cooper and Dyer point out, the natural law tradition is *the* essential variable that allows for both the viability and the existence of the American political order as we have known it. Any efforts to re-orient or re-found America threaten its very existence. Cooper and Dyer’s work documents how the American Founders skillfully navigated the American order between the proverbial *Scylla and Charybdis* of tyrannical secular power on one hand or the overly particular sectarian religious authority on the other.³¹ The natural law tradition provided a safe passage between these dangerous shoals on which many a political regime had been wrecked. Cooper and Dyer’s careful analysis on a number of these fronts critically undermines the claims made by Patrick Deneen, Stephen Pinker, and others, that hold that America was essentially modern at its origin.

The simple fact is that the natural law tradition contains a philosophical depth that grew out of pagan antiquity and reached maturity in the Christian intellectual tradition. Also, its ecumenical superstructure allowed for its adaption and acceptance by rationalist elites as well as popular religious enthusiasts. As the authors note, even while “a very small minority privately mocked the idea of miracles or supernatural revelation” or held “idiosyncratic view[s] of Christianity” and “remained philosophically or religiously skeptical” these doubters still

²⁶ Paul R. DeHart, “What’s wrong with Rod Dreher’s Straussian Narrative of the American Constitution”, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/12/20325/>

²⁷ Paul R. DeHart, “What’s wrong with Rod Dreher’s Straussian Narrative of the American Constitution”, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/12/20325/>

²⁸ Paul R. DeHart, “What’s wrong with Rod Dreher’s Straussian Narrative of the American Constitution”, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/12/20325/>

²⁹ Paul R. DeHart, “What’s wrong with Rod Dreher’s Straussian Narrative of the American Constitution”, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/12/20325/>

³⁰ Paul R. DeHart, “Madisonian Thomism” <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2017/01/18427/>

³¹ Kody W. Cooper & Justin Buckley Dyer, *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)

fundamentally “operated within a Christian milieu.”³² Even heterodox skeptics held beliefs on “divine providence, natural law, and natural rights, coupled with a grim view of human nature” that “might be held on the grounds independent of any belief in biblical revelation” and they ultimately did so because “those beliefs were deeply embedded in a culture that was shaped by Christianity.”³³

Beyond the political usefulness of its inherent ecumenism, the classical natural law tradition might also simply give the most complete account of the views of the Founders, from colonial pamphleteers, to revolutionary leaders, to Constitutional Framers. Not only did this tradition help bind American patriots together in political solidarity, but these fundamental premises also lay the groundwork for the entire American Constitutional system and rule of law rightly understood. Indeed, the very logic of constitutionalism suggests the existence of metaphysical limits on popular or state power that simply don’t exist in secular narratives of the Founding. Indeed, the American Constitution is hardly intelligible without this recognition. Thus, “To speak of the Christian natural law tradition, then, is to speak of the long Christian engagement with a philosophical tradition that understands human goods and moral norms to be based on a distinctive order of nature, created by God, and intelligible to human reason.”³⁴

Ultimately, these scholars show how the Enlightenment narrative of the American Founding that minimizes or erases the role of public virtue and religion is terribly foreshortened. Ultimately, the most careful and thoughtful scholarship holds that American Politics is deeply rooted in the metaphysical foundations of the Christian West. Virtue, properly understood, is connected to an objective moral order. In turn, virtue’s need for a home in genuine religious practice among the people requires a unique American commitment to religious liberty. Furthermore, the practice of sound governance requires deliberative democracy which again requires a moral order to deliberate within, and to deliberate about. Finally, all of this is underwritten by traditional orthodox Christian faith and practice.

Religious Orthodoxy: Spiritual Malaise of the West

In the end, the problems that America faces are ultimately rooted not in political institutions per se but the corruption of the American soul which in turn supports and shapes our political institutions. The inability or unwillingness of the American people to embrace and practice religion in a manner that fosters enough public moral virtue necessary to sustain ordered liberty seems to be at the heart of the problem. Patrick Deneen is correct that the radical autonomy of modern American society is at the core of the problem. And yet, is the radical autonomy of modern American society much different from the society described in the Biblical account of Judges 21 when: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”? Does this not describe the state of much of American society today? Was the disregard of the moral order seen in Judges really that different? It is hard to see how. The problems with modern radical autonomy seem to be problems related to having really old wine in radically new wineskins.

Some argue that the problem is with religious liberty itself and that some form of Christian establishment is now in order. A full examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this piece.

³² Cooper & Dyer, *Origins*, 24.

³³ Cooper & Dyer, *Origins*, 24.

³⁴ Cooper & Dyer, *Origins*

But for now it is not apparent that countries that have nominal establishments are healthier than those without.³⁵

Not only America, but the West in general, seem to be caught in a deep spiritual malaise. This malaise is not new, but it is indeed taking its toll on our culture and, in turn, our politics. For example, one must consider George Weigel's haunting account of the terrible slaughter and political malfeasance of World War I. In asking why the slaughter continued so long, Weigel points out that Europe had abandoned the one true God for the fickle and dangerous gods of the age:

Social Darwinism, Nietzschean irrationalism, xenophobia, and historical fatalism were acids eating away at notions of honor that had long tempered European politics and war making. For concepts of honor must be informed by prudence, the cardinal virtue the ancients called the "charioteer of the virtues," lest honor become an excuse for cruelty rather than a restraint on it.³⁶

But why had Europe given itself over to the gods of the age? Why did Europe, the birthplace of Christendom, not recognize the spiritual darkness that was in play? For Weigel, the answer lay in the prodigal tendencies of the European societies, primarily European elites.

In the Europe of 1914, biblical understandings of the human condition and the moral life had been under assault for well over a century, from both within and without the churches. From without, Auguste Comte's positivism (empirical science is humanity's only reliable teacher), Ludwig Feuerbach's subjectivism (the biblical God is a mere projection of human aspiration), and Karl Marx's materialism (the spiritual world is an illusion) meshed with Nietzsche's will to power to erode any biblically or theologically informed understanding of public life and political responsibility. From within, the more radical forms of historical criticism of the Bible and what was then known as liberal theology had, many thought, emptied the Christian creed of serious intellectual content. Evacuated of substance, the churches that professed those creeds and read that Bible became ever more expressions of ethnic and national consciousness—a process exacerbated by the subordination of many European Christian churches to state power through the mechanism of religious establishment.³⁷

Weigel's account here is chilling and, at the same time, all too familiar. Might it be the case, that America, like Europe, like the prodigal son, has walked away from the authority of its father and is in the midst of squandering its inheritance? Is America squandering its immense inheritance of land, security, wealth, and political liberty on an excessive pursuit of pleasure, power, and money? Has the abandonment of God and His laws by many in America led to the replacement of moral restraint with the very "isms" embraced by Europe; positivism, materialism, and nihilism? Has America's motto "land of the free and home of the brave" been replaced in some sense with a new motto of, "Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." It seems America is caught in a spiritual torpor that is much deeper and dangerous than the acids of modernity alone could effect. To put it another way, perhaps modernity is not the cause but the effect of a fundamental turn away from God.

³⁵ A study comparing the health of religion in various contexts seems in order.

³⁶ George Weigel, *The Great War Revisited*, First Things, 2014

³⁷ George Weigel, *The Great War Revisited*, First Things, 2014

For its part in the larger culture, the church is being challenged in its orthodoxy just as it was in the early part of the 20th century. Now, as then, denominations, individual churches, and worldwide communions are being forced to choose, especially in the realms of life and human sexuality, between Christian orthodoxy on one hand elite social acceptance on the other hand. The critics of modern liberal democracy, such as Deneen are right; individual autonomy has been unleashed and is wreaking havoc. But they misdiagnose the way forward outlined by the likes of Reilly, DeHart, Cooper and Dyer. A much more faithful America built institutions rooted in the metaphysics of the real world and it is in rebuilding and sustaining these institutions is where the hope lies.

G.K. Chesterton has a wonderful passage describing the modern condition and its emptiness in contrast to a life of faith.

Ultimately a man cannot rejoice in anything except the nature of things. Ultimately a man can enjoy nothing except religion. Once in the world's history men did believe that the stars were dancing to the tune of their temples, and they danced as men have never danced since... As for wine, modern man makes it, not a sacrament, but a medicine. Modern Man feasts because life is not joyful; he revels because he is not glad. "Drink," he says, "for you know not whence you come nor why. Drink, for you know not when you go nor where. Drink, because the stars are cruel and the world as idle as a humming-top. Drink, because there is nothing worth trusting, nothing worth fighting for. Drink, because all things are lapsed in a base equality and an evil peace." So he stands offering us the cup in his hand... And at the high altar of Christianity stands another figure, in whose hand also is the cup of the vine. "Drink" he says "for the whole world is as red as this wine, with the crimson of the love and wrath of God. Drink, for the trumpets are blowing for battle and this is the stirrup-cup. Drink, for this my blood of the new testament that is shed for you. Drink, for I know of whence you come and why. Drink, for I know of when you go and where."³⁸

America is drinking from the wrong cup for the wrong reasons. It seems to be the prodigal son. Will the prodigal return? As the Biblical narrative makes clear the father is always receptive to repentance. America has seen two great spiritual awakenings, perhaps there is a third in the offing? As Psalm 30 proclaims, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

This is an academic paper not a sermon, but the crisis in American politics seems rooted in the embrace of dark and empty philosophies much larger and deeper than modern liberalism. Modern liberalism is simply the host for a dark and creeping nihilism a spiritual malaise that has increasingly had Western culture by the throat for well over two centuries.

Talk of the human soul is well within the best practices of political philosophy. If we learn anything from Plato's Republic, it is that the condition of the human soul is intimately tied to the health of the polis. For Plato, well-ordered souls create a well-ordered republic. This is a fundamental lesson of politics. Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, Christian Rome, the Medieval polities, England, the American Founders, Tocqueville, etc. all believed in a metaphysical reality that does and should shape human society. It was modernity and its post-modern turn that led millions to dismiss the reality of a human soul and objective morality rooted in something beyond the human will. Too many in Americans today refuse to acknowledge or yield to that metaphysical authority, what has been called the "natural law"; the natural moral bounds within which every political order ever created must adhere to if it is to thrive and promote human flourishing. Do Americans want true freedom that comes only as its citizens order their souls and their liberty? Or

³⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/470/pg470-images.html>

instead, will Americans settle for that ersatz post-modern license masquerading as freedom? The fool's gold of post-modern freedom unleashes appetites and desires that only lead persons into slavery to those same desires. Such was true of the tyrant in Plato's Republic as it was true of the Israelites in Judges. Unbridled appetites lead to human slavery. If the true problem in American society is a radicalized human will, we must fight *that* moral and spiritual battle rather than tear down the structures and institutions that can still serve us well.

Americans must fight a two front war. One to restore a broken culture devoid of a moral compass on one front; and on the other front they must fight to preserve the political structures and traditions that have served them well prior to importation of European nihilism. While the philosophical project of European liberalism animated by the quest for individual autonomy is indeed a terrible failure, the American institutions, rightly grounded in notions of natural law, have provided fresh fields for human flourishing for over two hundred years. The fact that these fields are under assault by a nihilistic crusade is no reason to abandon the institutions and ideas that allowed human flourishing in the first place.

John Courtney Murray described American democracy as a "noble many-storied mansion," and he mused that someday it may "well be dismantled, levelled to the dimensions of a flat majoritarianism, which is no mansion but a barn, perhaps even a tool shed in which the weapons of tyranny may be forged."³⁹ In the end, if America escapes its spiritual illness it must still have a home, a mansion, to come back to. No human knows the future and it seems like folly to abandon the mansion of Americas birthright in the heat of cultural battle. The Founders were not fools; Lincoln was not a fraud. These men fought to build and preserve a political order the likes of the world has never seen. Lincoln and the founders knew they had created something special. It seems fitting then to end with a quote about Lincoln's statesmanship from the late Harry Jaffa:

The utterances that have come down to us, graven in bronze and in stone, like the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, are profound meditations on human experience. In the midst of the horrors of destruction and death, and amidst the turmoil of the passions of war, they are designed to reconcile us to our fate by discerning the hand of God in events that might otherwise seem merely chaotic. Although these speeches arise out of particular events at particular times, they draw back the curtain of eternity, and allow us, as time-bound mortals, to glimpse a divine purpose within a sorrow filled present, and tell us how our lives, however brief, can nonetheless serve a deathless end.⁴⁰

—Harry V. Jaffa

³⁹ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 56.

⁴⁰ Harry Jaffa, *The Speech that Changed the World*. <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-speech-that-changed-the-world/>

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