Illiberal Liberalism and the Future of the American Experiment

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Consider three recent events:

Last spring Charles Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, attempted to give a lecture at Middlebury College in Vermont. A crowd of protestors shouted him down, violently intimidated Murray and his host, pushed one female professor to the ground, and surrounded their car, pounding it and rocking it so that they had to creep away through the crowd to prevent injuring anyone.

In July, a Google engineer named James Damore used the company's internal discussion board to argue that Google's culture had become an "echo chamber," that dissent from what Damore considered a liberal bias was not allowed, and that perhaps the reason that there are fewer women programmers than men is not a result of inferior capabilities but a difference of interests. Damore was accused of fomenting a hostile work environment and fired.

We've all heard about what happened in Charlottesville last month. White nationalists, klansmen, and others marched ostensibly with the purpose of protesting the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. There was a counter-protest. Things turned violent. A woman was killed.

These events are related. I'd like to try to explain what's going on.

1. Liberalism

The modern mind is shaped by a conviction that we, as a society, are steadily advancing. We tell ourselves a story of progress that has fostered a certain cast of mind according to which the past is seen as a dark and benighted place inhabited by miserable and deeply errant wretches while the future is seen as a bright and hopeful place populated by happy and wise individuals who have shaken off the constraints of the past. The autonomous self—independent and free from any obligations that have not been expressly chosen—occupies this future land. Choice is the coin of this realm and the story these people tell each other is one characterized by the steady march toward independence, toward liberation from the strictures of tradition, custom, and even liberation from nature and God.

This new emancipated self represents the ideal of what has come to be called liberalism. And while today we often hear of different types of liberals—classical liberals and welfare liberals, for instance—I'm concerned with the noun rather than the adjective, for it is my contention that while there may be certain secondary differences and policy distinctions between types of liberals, they all share a common account of human nature.

The very word 'liberalism' derives from the Latin *liber*, which means "free." Ours is an age where individual freedom is cherished and any impediment to that freedom is seen as an affront that must be demolished. Social contract thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (and more recently John Rawls) developed a conception of "natural" man existing in a pre-political (and even pre-social) state of nature wherein each individual is completely unattached from other humans and in such a context all are absolutely free and equal. Social and political associations are formed by choice alone and any attachment or obligation formed without consent is deemed illegitimate.

Hobbes should be considered the founder of liberalism, for he begins his theoretical reflections with the atomistic individual and roots his account of sovereignty in consent. Hobbes, of course, showed how individualism could lead to absolutism. Locke, however, is often seen as a moderate. He followed Hobbes in theoretical terms by beginning with autonomous individuals in a state of nature. At the same time, unlike Hobbes he continued to affirm a more or less traditional view of society and morality. He speaks—albeit briefly—of natural law, which suggests a fidelity to a tradition of moral reasoning that traces its roots back to the Medieval scholastics and beyond them to Cicero and in some fashion to Aristotle. Nevertheless, in following Hobbes, Locke rejects any notion that political society is the natural state of human affairs. Because the state of nature leaves life, liberty, and property exposed to danger, these free individuals contract with each other to form society for the purpose of security.[1] In so doing they cede a portion of their rights (the right to punish offenders) to the established authorities.[2] This contract is legitimate because of the consent granted—either explicitly or tacitly—by each individual party to the contract.[3] For Locke, the only reasonable standard for subsequent legislation is the majoritarian principle.[4]

Such concepts seem quintessentially American given the Lockean flavor of the Declaration of Independence. We almost instinctively think in terms of consent of the governed; of free and equal individuals; of the rights to life, liberty, and property; and of the legitimacy of majoritarian rule. At the same time, Americans tend to be skeptical of tradition, which carries with it the musty odor of the past. Instead, we tend to be a future oriented people, boldly striving to ensure that tomorrow will be better than yesterday and optimistic that through hard work (and perhaps good fortune) brighter days will always be ahead. America has always been the land of perpetual dawn. There is, of course, a countervailing wind of pessimism that emerges periodically; however, it is not animated by any inclination to rediscover the wisdom of the past or to submit to limits manifest in that wisdom. Instead, it is a pessimism about the future, which still provides no positive orientation to the past except, perhaps, a whiff of nostalgia

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[1] Locke, *Second Treatise*, § 95.
[2] Locke, *Second Treatise*, § 129, 130.
[3] Locke, *Second Treatise*, § 119.
[4] Locke, *Second Treatise*, §97.

The Lockean framework around which our political institutions are ostensibly built, however, may not be as stable as we imagine. What, for instance, prevents the majority from oppressing a minority? Clearly, if there is no limit to the will of the majority, gross injustices are only a matter of time. *If* Locke's "state of nature has a law of nature to govern it" and *if* that law of nature is "as intelligible and plain to a rational creature, and a studier of that law, as the positive laws of the commonwealth" and *if* that law of nature continues in force even after the social contract is initiated, then the majority is checked, at least theoretically.[5] But what becomes of justice if this law of nature is ignored or denied? It would appear that the social contract could, in fact, become a means of oppression rather than liberation, for in practical terms power is amplified as individuals join forces and woe to those who run afoul of the majority.

Consider these same concepts in the hands of Rousseau. Like Locke before him, Rousseau begins with a state of nature in which all are perfectly free and equal. But unlike Locke, Rousseau's contract consists of "the total alienation of each associate, together with all of his rights, to the entire community."[6] In such a context, all remain equal, for all have alienated all rights to the community. Furthermore, in Rousseau's mind, all remain free, for "in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one. And since there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right that he would grant others over himself, he gains the equivalent of everything he loses, along with a greater amount of force to preserve what he has."[7] Freedom and equality are preserved but citizens now possess force, derived from their collective strength, so they can better preserve the freedom and equality to which they are committed. The sovereign, in Rousseau's scheme, is merely the collection of individual participants in the compact; thus, the sovereign could never have an interest that is contrary to the interests of the people as a whole.[8] The will of the whole is the general will, which though it becomes a somewhat mystical element in Rousseau's thought, is "always right."[9] Practically speaking, "the vote of the majority always obligates all the others."[10] For Rousseau, there is no limit on the majority, but this is not a troubling prospect, for law is nothing other than the general will, and no one would tyrannize himself. Power becomes at once unlimited and benign.

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[5] Locke, *Second Treatise*, §6 and §12.

[6] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK I, ch. 6.

[7] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK I, ch. 6

In such a context, the Lockean rights to life, liberty, and property take on an entirely different appearance. To oppose the general will is to act contrary to not only the will of the whole but to one's own will. In this light, Rousseau can claim that "whoever refuses to obey the general will will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means merely that he will be forced to be free."[11] In terms of property, "each private individual's right to his very own store is always subordinate to the community's right to all."[12] Even life itself becomes the possession of the state: "when the prince has said to him, 'it is expedient for the state that you should die,' he should die. Because it is under this condition alone that he has lived in security up to then, and because his life is not only a kindness of nature, but a conditional gift of the state."[13]

For Rousseau, it is not necessary to ask "who is to make the laws, since they are the acts of the general will…nor whether a law can be unjust, since no one is unjust to himself, nor how one is both free and subject to the laws, since they are merely the record of our own wills."[14] Popular sovereignty has been combined with the elimination of any conception of law that transcends the will of the majority, and this created a seismic shift in the development of liberalism. As John Hallowell puts it, liberalism "was based upon an uneasy compromise between two conflicting principles: the idea of the autonomy of individual will and reason and the idea of a higher law."[15] Once the commitment to a higher law was removed, the stage was set for the dramatic expansion of political power. It is perhaps no wonder that Bertrand de Jouvenel remarks that democracy—and here he means liberal democracy—is “the time of tyranny’s incubation.”[16]

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[8] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK, I ch. 7.
[9] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK. II, ch. 3.
[10] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK IV, ch. 2.
[11] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK I, ch. 7.
[12] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK I, ch. 9.
[13] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK II, ch. 5.
[14] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK II, ch. 6.
[15] Hallowell, *The Moral Foundations of Democracy*, 66.

There is a logic to this development. The first wave of liberalism (call it the moderate wave) began with a picture of autonomous individuals in a state of nature who join in an act of consent and thereby legitimate the exercise of power. Metaphysical speculation or religious dogma seemed both too questionable and divisive to provide an adequate foundation for a human polity. An alternative was needed. As George Sabine puts it, “convinced that it must start from what was self-evident, modern philosophy could find nothing apparently so solid and indubitable as individual human nature….Not man as a priest or a soldier, as the member of a guild or an estate, but man as a bare human being, a ‘masterless man,’ appeared to be the solid fact.”[17]

However, while this collection of concepts—the autonomous individual, state of nature, consent, etc.—was indeed radical, and while any explicit fidelity or deferral to the authority of tradition was ostensibly rejected in favor of a purely rationalistic approach to human affairs, a complete rejection was not so easily accomplished. As Robert Nisbet puts it, “the image of the people that glowed in the minds of such men as Jefferson was composed of elements supplied, actually, by a surrounding society strong in its social institutions and memberships….The symbols of liberalism, like the bells of the church, depend on prejudgments and social tradition.”[18] In other words, moderate liberalism could be moderate because it was nourished by a rich soil of non-liberal elements inherited from the past and embodied in habits and practices that provided limits to the impulse to liberation. The American Founding occurred in this context. The French Revolution, only a few years later, occurred in a milieu where the social soil was not nearly as thick or healthy and therefore the limits that served to temper the American Founding were absent. The ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality (admirable ideals when they exist in a proper context) ran to extremes and rather than giving birth to a new order of liberty, the Revolution descended into chaos and bloodshed.

Liberalism’s second wave represents a more radical and thorough realization of the ideal of autonomy. In reality it is merely a more honest version of liberalism, for first wave liberalism depended in practice on habits and traditions that it denied in theory. Liberalism in its pure sense turns on the absolutely free and unencumbered choice of the autonomous individual. As Michael

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[16] Jouvenel, *On Power*, 15.

[17] Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 432.

[18] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 205.

Sandel puts it, “for the liberal self, what matters above all, what is most essential to our personhood, is not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them.” The liberal self is conceived as “free and independent, unencumbered by the aims and attachments it does not choose for itself.”[19]

This absolutism of choice is clearly manifest in the words of Supreme Court Justice Kennedy in his 1992 opinion in Planned Parenthood v. Casey: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”[20] This all-encompassing affirmation of the infinite range of the autonomous self represents the apex of second wave liberalism. We see the implications of this expansive notion of liberty today when, for instance, the designations of male and female are denied as nothing more than social constructions, which is to say, the arbitrary imposition of a social limit to which I have not consented. All categories that were once seen as somehow rooted in nature or in the divine order have been rendered fluid and subject to nothing other than individual will. Freedom becomes, in this empire of liberation, capricious and eventually tyrannical.

While first wave liberalism was moderate and in many ways beneficial to those living under its sway, it was inherently unstable, for what stability it enjoyed was the result of assets surreptitiously retained from a pre-liberal past. It was theoretically compromised but practically conducive to political freedom. Second wave liberalism, on the other hand, is perhaps more consistent theoretically but becomes absolutist and thereby undermines the very liberty it ostensibly seeks to champion. Liberalism, in other words, when it matures beyond its conflicted adolescent version, consumes itself. When fully mature, it gives birth to a grotesque and deformed offspring of insatiable appetite, namely, illiberal liberalism.

This analysis puts the American situation in clearer relief. The American Founding occurred in the early stage of liberalism when American society was deeply rooted in a milieu of religious belief and cultural traditions that extended back into a non-liberal past. This delicate combination was the reason freedom could exist without running over its banks into chaos. In terms we have been using, the American Founding occurred as a first wave liberal project. With the continued development of liberalism, the first wave was replaced by liberalism’s second wave that explicitly and categorically rejects the limits imposed by religious belief or nature or the past.

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[19] Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 12.
[20] http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/505/833.html

Thus, modern conservatives who argue that returning to the original meaning of the Constitution will solve our many problems are misguided. That which provided the moral and political context for the Constitution has been dramatically altered. Russell Kirk put the matter in terms of the difference between written and unwritten constitutions. An unwritten constitution is the social, moral and political habits, beliefs, and practices that constitute a people.[21] All written constitutions emerge from an unwritten constitution and depend on that unwritten constitution for their sustained success. When a people's unwritten constitution changes, the written constitution must either change to accommodate the unwritten constitution or there will exist a fundamental tension between the two. In that conflict, the unwritten constitution will eventually prevail. In other words, if our original constitutional system was a project of first wave liberalism, that system will appear very different in the context of second wave liberalism. The solution—if there is one—is not a return to the original constitution unless that includes a prior recovery of the cultural resources that animated that document, resources that have been largely burned away by the caustic acid of liberalism.

Those who argue that America is a propositional nation also miss an important fact. America was founded by people deeply formed by the Christian narrative who believed in a moral order that was both intelligible and obligatory. It was in this context that the Founding occurred. Jefferson's grand phrases about the "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," were written into a cultural consensus that simply does not exist today. The propositions expressed in the Declaration of Independence provide an adequate framework of self-understanding only if they are superimposed upon a background of a shared cultural vision. Tocqueville argued that laws are an important part of what gives America its identity but more fundamental than laws are the mores that give shape to the moral world of America's citizens. Tocqueville defines mores as "the whole moral and intellectual state of a people."[22] If the mores of a people change, or perhaps more to the point, if the mores fragment so that groups holding competing sets of mores occupy the same place and subsist under the same Constitution and the same founding propositions, we should expect political chaos. Abstract propositions about the human condition are not adequate to bind a people to each other or to a common good. The idea of a propositional nation only worked when the propositions were not doing the heavy lifting required to form a people into citizens. The propositional nation is a shorthand—or perhaps better, a sleight-of-hand—that downplays the thick and necessary cultural consensus necessary to bind a people in favor of glowing abstractions that have proven inadequate once the underlying consensus collapsed.

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[21] Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 416.

[22] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 275.

This loss of a shared cultural consciousness is at least in part driven by the fact that the liberal self has an inadequate conception of past. If the past is seen as something from which we have managed to escape, one will find precious little reason to revisit that clammy dungeon. The result is a loss of shared cultural memories and an accompanying loss of a desire to study the past. In 1930, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset noted that "the most 'cultured' people today are suffering from incredible ignorance of history." However, "historical knowledge is a technique of the first order to preserve and continue a civilisation already advanced."[23] An ignorance of history among a population of citizens who ostensibly govern themselves will result in nothing other than, as Ortega put it, "the vertical invasion of the barbarians" for a people without knowledge of history is no longer capable of civilization.[24] They become their own barbarian hordes, ill-equipped to either govern themselves or to maintain a free society. In this regard, Nisbet argues that "a sense of the past is far more basic to the maintenance of freedom than hope for the future….Hence the relentless effort by totalitarian governments to destroy memory."[25] However, the liberal self has accomplished with far greater efficiency (and considerably less bloodshed) what the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth-century sought. We have come to view our own past with apathy, embarrassment, or even scorn. At best we see the study of history as a diversion or perhaps a place to mine for evidence of past grievances. Instead, a proper encounter with history sees the study of the past as a vital, living, and authoritative reality that, despite its complexity and shortcomings, exercises claims on us. Apathy, carelessness, or scorn are far more effective destroyers than outright hostility. We have become voluntary amnesiacs.

2. Cosmopolitanism

Rousseau insists that his ideal republic must be relatively small and that "the larger the state becomes, the less liberty there is," for he insists that unity is the indispensable element.[26] Thus, the notion of “an extended republic” as Madison puts it, would be for Rousseau an incoherent aspiration. Of course, today in America the ideal of a small republic—as championed by Rousseau as well as Montesquieu and the Anti-federalists—has faded and the large republic and even political institutions that extend beyond the nation have emerged. Nevertheless, much of Rousseau’s thought remains pertinent. In many ways, Rousseau is more relevant now than ever before. With the ideal of individualism along and a suspicion of anything that suggests limits on the autonomous chooser, the stage has been set for a dangerous combination of Rousseauean liberty and a cosmopolitan political and social ideal where local particularities are subsumed under the rubric of unity. Thus we have the ideal of the autonomous chooser combined with a cosmopolitan impulse that seeks to eradicate local differences even as it celebrates the unconstrained choices of individuals. This combination of concepts can be summed up as the liberal cosmopolitan ideal. Such an ideal champions individual liberty, despises limits, and at the same time seeks unity, even if that unity compromises the liberty of some, who will, in Rousseau’s words, be forced to be free. Again, illiberalism lurks in the dark interior of the liberal edifice.

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[23] Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 91.

[24] Ortega, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 53.

[25] Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*, 184-5.

[26] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, BK III, 1.

The liberal cosmopolitan dares to dream of a world that has broken free from the limits of national particularities and of public religious commitments. Furthermore, cosmopolitanism is a natural corollary to liberalism.[27] It is a dream that has long animated the liberal imagination and provided a unifying narrative of political and social progress toward a world no longer beset by the differences of particular localities, traditions, and ideas. It is the dream that drives globalization, that “inevitable” force that will one day soon unite us all. However exasperating it may be to those who are charmed by such a vision, there are some who reject it outright and many who instinctively recoil from it. The ongoing tension between those who advocate a universal, cosmopolitan state of affairs where nation-states are subsumed into international bodies, and those who resist such a vision in the name of national sovereignty and the goodness of local autonomy is not going to subside.

Given this duality, I think we would do well to move beyond conceiving the social and political landscape in terms of a struggle between left and right or even between liberals and conservatives, as those terms are popularly employed today. Instead, I want to suggest that our situation today is best conceived as a conflict between those who advocate some version of liberal cosmopolitanism and those who instead uphold the idea of limits: Consider how this tension plays out in a seeming mundane issue: national borders. The liberal cosmopolitan sees borders as an unjust physical limit on free movement, which is to say, unjust limits on the free expression of the self. For those who recognize and submit to limits—both moral and legal—borders represent a proper way of framing the political and social landscape. These debates go far deeper than prudential questions of how best to govern. They are ultimately rooted in two profoundly different ways of seeing the world and of two profoundly different ways of understanding the human condition, and these differences were clearly seen in the dramatic events of the past year.

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[27] Of course, cosmopolitanism is not a new idea. It has existed since antiquity. However, the liberal self finds a natural complement in the cosmopolitan ideal that gives the latter a plausibility and a practical efficacy that is unprecedented.

The Brexit vote in July of 2016 followed by Donald Trump's "surprise" win in November of the same year should be understood as part of the same movement that, while not a tsunami, represents a clear challenge to the liberal cosmopolitan agenda that champions internationalism over nationalism, an abstract global community over concrete local affiliations, and celebrates the inevitability of globalization. The fact that globalization has suffered a series of recent setbacks must be galling (not to mention confusing) to those convinced that it represents the inevitable logic of history.[28] President Obama, in his farewell address to the United Nations, expressed his concern and laid out his vision for a more unified world. "I believe that at this moment we all face a choice. We can choose to press forward with a better model of cooperation and integration. Or we can retreat into a world sharply divided, and ultimately in conflict, along age-old lines of nation and tribe and race and religion."[29] There are, in Obama's mind, two stark choices: liberal cosmopolitan peace or the violence and unrest of nationalism, tribalism, and racial and religious wars.

Admittedly, Donald Trump is an odd messenger of the working class left behind in the euphoria of globalization. But many who witnessed the decimation of their communities along with the flight of capital and talent were led to question whether what benefits the purveyors of abstractions is equally beneficial to the rest. It goes without saying that Trump is no defender of tradition and surely no coherent advocate of limits. However, his America First rhetoric touched a chord that lay long unsounded by national leaders. His emphasis on securing the nation's borders pushed against the cosmopolitan dream of a world without borders where citizens of the world (and therefore of nowhere in particular) wander the planet seeking wealth, pleasure, and diversion. His refusal to submit to the strictures of political correctness endeared him to many (or at least earned him a grudging respect of those) who intuit that sanity rooted in common sense has fled the field under an onslaught of powerful and self-righteous individuals and institutions hell-bent on compelling all citizens to conform to standards that grow increasingly bizarre.

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[28] The "logic of history" is, itself, a confusing notion, for it suggests that history has a particular normative direction. Yet such a determinative direction runs counter to the belief that freedom consists of the infinite expansion of my personal choice. The logic of history is determinate; infinite freedom is not. Both cannot be true.

[29] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/address-president-obama-71st-session-united-nations-general-assembly

In short, the rise of Trump and Trumpism represented a reaction against forces—both on the left and right—openly hostile to local communities, limits, and certain aspects of orthodox Christianity. These are the ones who, as President Obama put it, "cling to their guns and religion." Trumpism represents a reaction against both cosmopolitanism and identity politics, which together constitutes the bulk of the Democratic Party (and elements of the Republican Party although in different ratios). However, at the same time, Trump's victory does not represent a non-liberal reaction (except on the fringes) but rather a largely visceral attempt to recover the conditions and benefits of first wave liberalism.

3. The Limits of Liberalism

In practical terms, it does not appear that late-stage liberalism is a reliable protector of individual liberty. Consider the illiberal impulse, all too common today, to shout down or shut down, by physical or legal force, any who express disagreement with the liberal conception of the self. The language of individual rights is pervasive, but all too often rights are used as weapons to compel others rather than as a guarantor of the freedoms proper to human beings, for rights stripped of their metaphysical context—grounded in natural law and a theologically informed anthropology—descend into mere assertions of individual will. On college campuses we hear of so-called micro-aggressions and trigger warnings by means of which free speech is curtailed and those who do not bow to the reigning liberal orthodoxy are punished. We hear of proprietors and institutions that are legally sanctioned for refusing, as a matter of conscience, to celebrate lifestyle choices of those with whom they disagree. The freedom of religion, itself, is threatened under the auspices of a liberalism that refuses to acknowledge the freedom of dissenters. Such curtailment of freedom—ironically, in the name of freedom—hearkens back to Rousseau's ominous warning that those who refuse to bow to the general will will be forced to be free. Again, we see here what seems to be the fruits of the late-stage liberalism in which all limits have been dissolved in the acid of individual emancipation.

In speaking of religious freedom, we should recall that Rousseau advocated the abolition of historic Christianity and the adoption of what he called a “civil religion,” a religion invented to consolidate the power of the state.[30] Rousseau understood what champions of a so-called secular state don’t: religion is unavoidable. As Rousseau puts it: “no state has even been founded without religion as its base.” In other words, humans are unavoidably (dare I say irredeemably?) religious. Rousseau understood that the question is not *if* humans will worship but, rather, *what* will they worship? As such, he sought to overturn Christianity and replace it with a religion that was incorporated into the state and served its ends. Such a religion, Rousseau insists, should have few and general dogmas that include only one “negative dogma” or prohibition: intolerance. For Rousseau, civil intolerance and theological intolerance are indistinguishable. Intolerance consists in the belief that another is fundamentally wrong: “tolerance should be shown to all those that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of a citizen.” That final clause is frightening in its implications, which he spells out in the next sentence: “whoever dares to say *outside the church there is no salvation* ought to be expelled from the state.” There is, in other words, no place for principled disagreement at a fundamental level. There is, in this illiberal liberalism, only compulsion and exile for those who dare to oppose the “sentiments of sociability” imposed by the general will. Those who are paying attention to the American social and political scene will undoubtedly hear echoes of Rousseau in the words of the social justice warriors who are, with great self-righteousness and energy, set on compelling their opponents to be sociable.

Of course, the problem is not choice, *per se*. It is the attempt to erase or ignore any limits on the choosing self and insist that the only legitimate guide is the unencumbered will. In this view, contract, rather than nature or covenant, lies at the heart of human relations. Nothing can trump individual choice (as long as the choice falls within the narrow parameters of the reigning orthodoxy).

The classical liberal asserts that this atomistic conception of the human person not only is true but is the best preserver of liberty. However, we should at least pause when we notice that the classical liberalism of the nineteenth-century seems to have given way to (and perhaps paved the way for) the welfare-state liberalism of the twentieth-century. Could it be that the autonomous individual is inadequate to resist the centralizing forces that threaten to reduce free men and women to wards of the state? Could it be that, bereft of the bonds of robust and stable communities that acknowledge some limits, the individual naturally looks to the state to fill the void? Tocqueville argues that autonomous individualism is the engine that facilitates the growth of the centralized state. He placed his bets on the ability of associations to stave off the creep toward centralization, yet associations are not adequate on their own. Tocqueville argues that in early America the spirit of religion—by which he meant Christianity—served to limit the spirit of freedom, and here we can see how religious belief created a context within which associations could exist and thrive. Tocqueville was describing what we called first wave liberalism. However, it is not clear that today the spirit of Christianity exercises the same kind of influence over American life that it did in Tocqueville's day, and to the extent that this is so, we have moved into liberalism's second phase and the stage is set for its undoing.

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[30] Quotations from Rousseau in this paragraph come from *The Social Contract*, BK IV, ch. 8.

Today we are experiencing an almost complete victory of liberalism. Because liberalism seeks to eradicate all impediments to individual autonomy, it necessarily works its caustic effects over all competing accounts of the human person. Liberalism is a totalizing system that re-creates all things in its own image and that which resists recreation is seen as an enemy that must be destroyed. As a result, Christian reflection on politics is often little more than the acceptance of liberal categories—individualism, consent, autonomy, etc—papered over with a veneer of Biblical moralisms. This does not signal the dominance of "a Christian worldview" but rather the liberal conquest of the Christian mind. Even the church is not immune from these forces.

4. Religious Politics

While the essence of liberalism is the liberation of the individual, there is a second aspect to liberalism we have not yet addressed, namely, equality. For the social contract thinkers, the state of nature consists of individuals who are completely free and completely equal. The two ideals are both essential to liberalism. As we have seen, freedom has come to mean the eradication of limits on individual choice. This impulse to liberation initially focused on eliminating the authority of tradition but continued to eventually include the attempted elimination of the authority of nature and God.[31] When the widest latitude for individual choice is the goal, all choices come to be seen as equally valid as long as they are freely chosen. Any overt notion of substantive goods is replaced by the mere insistence that processes are in place to facilitate unencumbered free choices. Equality, in this respect, becomes a corollary to a liberal conception of freedom, and any impediment to either freedom or equality becomes an affront. In this context, tolerance becomes insufficient, for tolerance implies difference and even a tacit affirmation of hierarchy, for one only tolerates what one disapproves of. Disapproval, in other words, implies that some choices are better than others, and though I believe your choices are inferior to mine, I will tolerate your bad choices for the sake of peace, stability, or some other good. But if equality, along with freedom, is an unassailable ideal, then every hint of disapproval must be removed, for only then will complete equality be achieved. Tolerance must be replaced by approval, and approval must soon give way to celebration, which is to say the liberal conception of the self eventually seeks to eliminate differences. Enforced diversity ends in bland uniformity. The flip side of this trajectory is that those who refuse to fall in line will be demonized as judgmental, intolerant, or to employ Rousseau's term, unsociable. Such individuals are the heretics of the liberal order and must be silenced or purged. In the name of freedom and equality, the freedom of those who insist that not all choices are equal will be disregarded. Equality becomes forced conformity and freedom a charade both in service of a self-righteous power by which the liberal order seeks to eliminate all contenders. Liberalism, in other words, consumes all rivals and then consumes itself.[32]

Recently equality has played out in another way that at first seems to run counter to cosmopolitanism: identity politics. The two are related, for the current expressions of both are rooted in the myth of the liberal self. But, we need to push further, for it is my contention that we can't understand the meaning of these movements apart from Christian categories. They represent, or so I will argue, partial and often badly deformed articulations of Christian themes. Why? Despite various attempts at eliminating the public influence of Christianity, the residue of Christianity is not so easily effaced. In other words, it is no easy task to re-paganize a society once it has had a deep encounter with Christianity.

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[31] In terms of morality, this gave us what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls emotivism—a moral theory that reduces right and wrong to nothing more than individual feelings. In terms of metaphysics, this led to the abandonment of classical realism in exchange for nominalism. Nominalism, of course, has been lurking around for centuries—Ockahm after all predates liberalism. Yet, Ockham's narrow technical point has found fertile soil in the emancipated self. Thus, it is no surprise that nominalism comes fully into its own in the modern era.

[32] It must be acknowledged that freedom and equality are both admirable ideals. They are valuable additions to any reflection on persons and societies. The problem comes, as with any ideal, when one or both are isolated and absolutized. The ideal becomes an ideology, and disorder (and often bloodshed) inevitably ensues.

Liberalism and its descendants, cosmopolitanism and identity politics, are rooted in religious impulses that seek to replace Christianity with pseudo-Christian categories. However, each are compelling because they traffic in Christian themes and symbols. First, though, let's go back. It's Nietzsche who reminds us that there is no modern liberal democracy apart from Christianity. As he puts it, "the democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement."[33] What, specifically, is the connection? Equality, the idea of which has deeply embedded itself "into the tissue of modernity."[34] Tocqueville agrees and argues that the single most important idea animating the modern world is equality, which is the offspring of Christianity. Liberal democracy, it seems, is unimaginable apart from Christianity.

In this light, we shouldn't be surprised if we hear the echo of Christianity in modern political ideologies. Yet, these Biblical themes have been stripped of their spirit, if you will, and have come to serve human rather than divine ends. First, the theme of liberation finds its roots in the Exodus of Israel where God delivers the Hebrew children from the oppression of slavery in Egypt. Slavery represents an unjust limit on freedom. Yet, when the notion of justice is separated from its divine source, liberation from all limits becomes the ideal. Any limit is seen as oppression. And oppression, as we all know, is undesirable and must be removed. Liberalism represents the impulse of the Exodus bereft of God and in such a context, the Promised Land is illusory.

Cosmopolitanism represents, on one level, a replaying of the Tower of Babel story wherein humans long for unity and seek to create it on their own apart from God. It also traffics, perhaps more specifically, in an eschatological longing for the peace and unity found in the Kingdom of God at the end of days (fueled by a universalized concern for others). But again, the concepts have been immanentized. Where the Kingdom of God is properly understood to be deferred to the Parousia, and therefore believers wait in hopeful expectation, an immanentized version depends on our active efforts to bring it about in cooperation with the "logic of history" which is a secularized version of divine providence. This explains how the cosmopolitans can talk about the "inevitability" of globalization (which is an economic and political theory often covering up a theological aspiration) and at the same time work diligently for that end and see any who resist as both irrational and working against "history" which is a heresy against the faith in "progress."

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[33] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §202.
[34] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §765.

Identity politics is rooted in a profound intuition about the human condition that Nietzsche understood better than most. As he put it, "every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affect, actually or in effigy."[35] The categories of debt and guilt are deeply embedded in the human psyche. For the Christian, this is irrevocably tied to the Fall and presages the need for divine grace. But even if we claim that there is no sin that binds us all together and points to our need of "outside" help, the experience of guilt remains along with an urge to punish. Identity politics takes up the idea of guilt and specifies a debtor. Rather than guilt extending to the human race *per se*, guilt is directed at a particular class (currently some combination of white, male, heterosexual, Christian). A "chosen people," rendered guiltless by historic or appropriated grievance, is justified in punishing the guilty. But there is no Christ and therefore no grace. The punishment does not remove the stain of guilt; therefore, no punishment is sufficient. One side is justified by its status as victim; the other is perpetually guilty and therefore deserving of punishment. The cycle is relentless and the logic unassailable.

However, the identity politics that has grown out of the left is fostering a mirror image of itself on the right. It isn't surprising that some young white males would eventually react to the hopeless situation of being forever stained by guilt. The response is seen in the rise of white nationalism and neo-Nazism. But this is where the narrative diverts from Christian categories and plunges directly to the end Nietzsche envisioned. The language of blood and soil is not Christian. It represents a return to a pre-Christian pagan understanding of membership. It denies the legitimacy of guilt and therefore of mercy or justice. It does not look for grace. Without apology or qualification it embraces the will to power. These two versions of identity politics will feed off of each other as each seems to legitimate the existence of the other. As leftist identity politics focusing on race and gender continues to insist on punishing the guilty, the identity politics of the right will find more sympathizers and adherents. The left will justify violence in response, and its armed wing, the Antifa, is already mobilized. Identity politics will meet the hard nihilism of Antifa, and the dominant gene in that union will be inclined neither to tolerance nor to peace.

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[35] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals,* §15.

What we see in all this is that political movements are motivated by something deeper than politics. Furthermore, what we are witnessing today is the cessation of democratic politics—which depends on debate, compromise, and respect—and the rise of naked power that is expressed as self-righteousness. We have the vestiges of Christian categories but without Christ. We have, as a consequence, the absence of grace and instead a works-based salvation that must be achieved in time rather than realized in eternity. We must, it turns out, save ourselves. This theologically malnourished self-understanding was clearly on display in the election of 2008. Candidate Obama preached to adoring crowds: "we are the ones we've been waiting for." What is that other than the outlines of a works-based soteriology that puts ourselves in the messianic role? But temporal salvation is a dangerous business, for we moderns tend to be characterized by nothing so much as our impatience. We want salvation and we want it now. Or to put the matter in terms of a common chant by the social justice warriors: "what do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" Of course, justice is a good thing, but as Christians have long understood, the best we can do is approximate justice in our imperfect and bumbling attempts to right wrongs, help the hurting, and repair damaged institutions. However, when politics becomes religious, gaining the reins of power becomes the sole obsession of both parties, for power becomes the only prize worth pursuing. In this age of immantenized religion, the theological virtues are transformed to facilitate and justify the power of the state. Charity (love) becomes state welfare; hope deferred to the Day of the Lord becomes a demand for immediate action by the state; and faith in God is transmuted into a faith in state power to create a just world. Politics, in short, has become religious. Or to put it more provocatively, politics has become too Christian, albeit a badly deformed version of Christianity.

5. Strategies for Recovery

So what can be done? This question can be answered on different levels, and I have time now only to make some brief suggestions, first from the perspective of politics and then from the perspective of theology but both turn on seeing Christianity in its proper context.

First, if the problem is the evacuation of theological meaning from Christian symbols, the obvious answer is a restoration of Christianity. A revitalized Christianity will have the effect of restoring a proper relationship between politics and Christianity rather than collapsing the two into one political religion. As I said earlier, secularism is not the problem. Political religion is the problem and that only is possible when Christian symbols are co-opted by politics to produce a civil religion. Political religion (or religious politics) seeks the ends of Christianity—perfection, unity, justice, and peace—but employs the means of political power to achieve those ends in the temporal realm. And it does so with all the self-righteous confidence of a religious crusader. The restoration of Christianity (or even an affirmation of a moral order to which we are bound) would free politics to once again be political. In such a context, we would admit that the human condition is fraught with complexities and imperfections. We would recall that politics is never about perfection or finality but rather entails rational debate, compromise, and a willingness to replace passion, perfection, and immediacy with respect, modesty, and patience.

A revitalized Christianity will allow us to address the real historical grievances the effects of which we still experience. I mean, of course, slavery. It's been said that slavery is America's original sin, but whether or not we frame matters in such a fashion, we are ignoring the experience of many of our fellow citizens—and fellow believers—if we pretend that this has been fully resolved. However, the solution is not identity politics, for reducing all issues to race is just as myopic as ignoring the racial tensions that actually exist. The solution is not government programs. The solution can only be found in the gospel, which is to say the solution must be rooted in the churches. Identity politics represents a human (all too human) attempt to punish the guilty but offers no forgiveness and therefore no restoration. What we can do, and what only the church is equipped to do, is preach forgiveness in Christ that serves as a template for us to forgive others. Only through forgiveness made imaginable by the gospel is reconciliation and restoration possible.

Finally, I want to suggest two theological ideas that, if we take them seriously, will compel Christians toward an account of human nature that is far superior to that offered by liberalism.

First, when we speak of creation our thoughts tend to be drawn back to the beginning where God speaks the world into existence. Christian theologians have spent a great amount of time discussing the supposed dates and sequences of events and whether or not the opening chapters of Genesis should be read literally, figuratively, mythically, or allegorically. This focus has been, in some ways, an unfortunate distraction. By focusing attention on the event of creation at some remote time in the past, we foster the impression that the world is a self-sustaining machine, a sort of Newtonian mechanism, that God brought into existence at a particular time and, though he has intervened on occasion, the structure itself is autonomous and self-sufficient. This is, at best, an incomplete view of creation. Rather than center our reflections on the Genesis account, we would do better to understand creation through the lens of the great Christological hymn in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. St. Paul writes of Christ that “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”[36] Christ precedes, both temporally and ontologically, all that is not God, and what is more, all things are held together by Him. If He withheld His creative power from the cosmos even for a second, all things would cease to be. As Augustine puts it, “he did not create and then depart; the things derived from him have their being in him.”[37] In this light, we can see that creation is not a one-off event that happened at some debatable date in history, but rather creation is happening now-and-now-and-now as Christ’s will and power sustains all according to His good pleasure. From this perspective it’s readily seen how the idea of a mechanistic creation dovetails with the idea of an autonomous self, and how focusing on the singular event of creation helps foster the former and make plausible the latter. However, when we view creation Christologically, both temptations are deflected. The creation is not ontologically self-sustaining and neither is the self. Instead, the creation in general and humans specifically are essentially, necessarily, and perpetually contingent. Indeed, we owe every aspect and every moment of our being to Christ through whom all things were made and who holds all things together. There is no existence apart from that on-going ontological sustenance.

Second, the autonomous liberal self is an assertion that tacitly challenges Trinitarian theology. According to orthodox Christianity, God exists eternally as three persons. There was no point in eternity where God consisted of one person and, through some act of self-division, two more persons were created. God in his eternality consists of a plurality and a unity: one God, three persons. Yet, in His tri-unity God exists as a community—not as a community of independent gods, but rather as a community of persons within a unified God-head. Thus, at the very center of reality is not an autonomous self but a divine communion characterized by loving mutuality and self-giving.

If humans are created in the image of God, and if God is in His very essence a divine communion, then it seems to follow that humans, by nature, are not simply autonomous beings. Like God, we are essentially communal beings. Unlike God, however, we don’t in ourselves constitute a community. Rather, we find ourselves naturally and necessarily embedded in relationships from the very start. We are members of a family, a community, a parish, a neighborhood before we can even begin to conceive of ourselves as individuals. The act of individuation always occurs in the context of memberships that are given and exist before we possess the ability to encounter the world rationally or to even imagine that we are autonomous selves. We are, in other words, essentially creatures of community. Attempts to imagine or create a condition of autonomy—as with the liberal self—is to do violence to the order of reality.

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[36] Colossians 1:17 (ESV).

[37] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV, xii(18).

The doctrine of the trinity not only insulates against idea of the autonomous self, it also deflects an account of society in which the individual is subsumed by the larger community. The trinity maintains individual personality in the context of divine community. Both are essential, and theories of human nature or human communities that do violence to either the essential reality of the individual or of the community are contrary to the divine nature and therefore run contrary to reality itself. Both individualism and collectivism are an affront to the world God has created.

I recently spoke with a former professor who reminded me that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the true story of humanity. Our society may, he told me, have to eat husks with the pigs before we come to our senses. However, we all know that the father is waiting, and furthermore, we live in a God haunted world. His voice and His fingerprints are ever present. We in the West also live in a Christ-haunted world, and though the memory of the gospel story is readily distorted it is not easily erased. This points to both our sickness and the cure. Such is the shape of our situation. The only hope for our future is to return to the house of our Father.