

The Meaning of Christian Culture: A Historical View

By GLENN W. OLSEN

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In the view of the Donatists, because men are free to choose, "a policy which forced this choice was plainly irreligious."¹ For Augustine, like Newman in the *Grammar of Assent* after him, such a view was one of those terrible simplifications — the kind which John Stuart Mill could hardly write a sentence without committing — which befuddle human discourse. In Peter Brown's description: "The final, individual act of choice must be spontaneous; but this act of choice could be prepared by a long process, which men did not necessarily choose for themselves, but which was often imposed on them, against their will, by God."² Augustine has a growing sense that man does not stand undetermined in his choices: environment has a great role to play. Without denying that man does have a free will, Augustine wished to underline the myriad ways in which what we choose is determined by factors outside us, in his case — and that of Newman — for instance, his mother. We are predisposed to the choices we make by many factors, some of which we are conscious of and some of which we are not, but in no case do we make an "absolutely free" choice, if by that we mean a choice that can be freed from our own history and context. One of the great difficulties a modern has in appreciating Augustine here is that so many of us habitually think of freedom as absolute.

Beginning with an idea of freedom not very different from earlier writers, Augustine came to appreciate the way in which Judaism already had dealt with the problem of "Jewish culture." The Law of Moses had never been followed by more than a minority, who had imposed the Law on the majority by force, thus more or less saving the majority from their own worst inclinations, polytheism for instance. While earlier Augustine had been inclined to see Christianity as a "spiritual" religion which did not need physical sanctions, a view that neatly flowed from a Neoplatonism which saw man as essentially the soul, as in a hundred ways in his maturity he came to reassess the place of *corpus*, matter, and time in human life, and haltingly to see that man is a soul united to a body, he also came to doubt that religion was essentially spiritual.³ Man becomes what he becomes not just through argument, but through his bodily experience, and any religion which could not see this was not really speaking to man but to souls.

A Replatonizing Age

It seems clear to me that we are again living in a profoundly Platonic age: the devastation of the liturgy and the material in religion in the past twenty years, of those things which try to make the holy palpable, and the attack by moral the-

ologians on traditional notions of what sexually one does with one's body, should be viewed in the setting of a re-Platonizing age in which man is conceived as essentially soul, rather than as soul expressed in body. John Paul II's lifework almost might be seen as an attack on this tendency in the name of an embodied Christianity.⁴ Augustine for his part never fully relinquished his notion of spiritual religion, but he came more and more to believe that the spiritual few had responsibility for the indifferent many, and that there were cases in which the boundaries for all had to be drawn by force. Implicit in such an idea was the conviction that Origen's earlier suggestion that man might advance indefinitely by reason was wrong: history was likely to remain forever not a place of continuing progress, but of education and testing in which the ground base of a universally shared sin set a limit on how far man in society could advance. Likely the intellectually and morally indifferent would always dominate numerically, and law and force would be needed both to set tolerable limits and to encourage the many in the personal progress of which they were capable.

Such a view of what man is goes against most of our deepest instincts, but does have the merit of being honest. Augustine's argument in *Letter 185* is that the conversion of the emperor and then of the state to Christianity presented a new situation in which a Christian emperor now enacted laws against "wicked deeds" and "irreligion."⁵ Most of us, while granting the right of the state and of law to work against the first form of impiety, would not want to allow the state to legislate on matters which are only seen as impious by the light of revelation, but Augustine could not see it this way because he — in spite of the vague location by Roman law of sovereignty in "the people" — had no democratic notion that political authority derives "from below."

Here we come to a most difficult, perhaps inexplicable, problem. Augustine, like a good Roman, saw social life, the public and the private, as one, and assumed that the emperor had the right to legislate on all matters regarding truth and justice, whether the principles used derived from what we would call grace or nature. Because most of us assume that authority derives from the people, we tend to assume that what at least the majority of the people cannot see as true ought not be legislated for all. The perspective of faith ought not be imposed on those lacking faith. Both views about the sources of authority, that of the Romans and that of the democrats, seem to me mythological, and I take it that this is one of the reasons why a long line of popes from Leo XIII to at least Pius XII refused, whatever their personal views, to place the Church on any side in the classic debate over the best form of government.⁶ Some, arguably themselves sympathetic to monarchy, like Leo XIII himself, while pointing out that democratic theory was clearly flawed in deriving political authority from the people rather than God, nevertheless were

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content — rightly I think — to say that the Church and Christians could live and work within any system, as long as that system did not make freedom to do the will of God impossible for those who believed. But the question of mythology remained. While personally I think the classical arguments for monarchy — prudential judgments of time and place aside for the moment — are decisive, the proposal of romantic Catholicism that the most natural kind of authority is that which was already there when the royal family emerged out of the prehistorical mist, does not seem convincing.⁷

I cannot linger here, but I do not see that much more can be said than that every form of political life in part rests on assent from those governed, and in part on force imposed from the top.

This said, one can be more sympathetic toward Augustine's acceptance of an emperor who did acknowledge that his authority came from God. Although of course with time sophistication grew, I do not see that his situation was essentially different from those in much later states of Christian culture. His position does speak to the problem of whether, for any reason, the state may impose a point of view at least partly derived from revelation, for he sees that the notion of legitimate authority is always in part going to be what a society defines it as. Because the first obligation of a state cannot be the enhancement of an absolute notion of the freedom of the individual — a definition of freedom in such a way is itself mythical, as we have seen — but is rather the guiding of its people to as much of the truth, from whatever source this truth derives, as it reasonably is capable of, there is no more against a public order founded on the truths of reason and revelation than one founded purely on the natural. As the medieval historian R. W. Southern notes in an extraordinarily perceptive discussion on the rights of the medieval state to foster Christianity, any constitutional order has a boundary beyond which it refuses to tolerate action, and an enshrined truth.⁸

A Deep Resistance

Such a view, even if it can maintain itself against the more optimistic anthropology underlying Aquinas's fragmented political views, is certainly headed for deep resistance as we approach the American experience, where a writer like John Courtney Murray can be lionized by Left and sometimes Right together for the touching view that civic life is analogous to that of a great debating society.⁹ In America, a country in which already in the seventeenth century a minuscule Catholic population prided itself in its ability to reverse traditional understandings of the relation of the state to individual conscience, what chance is there for an honesty that asks how long we will have to wait for the truth to emerge by free debate, and notices that the freer the debate the less anyone agrees on anything, that in fact the very existence of truth itself falls under question?¹⁰ What hope is there for intelligent discussion of the problem of Christian culture in a country where virtually all right-thinking Catholics support some reading of the First Amendment, not, as I do, as a matter of prudence, but as genuinely an improvement over earlier attempts to find the proper place for revealed religion in society?

Let me elaborate on this last point as a way of sketching in conclusion a theory of the relation of nature, grace, and culture. My position flows from de Lubac's reconsideration of the relation of nature to grace. He, in attacking the manual tradition on this question, showed that Aquinas, "whenever

he speaks of the nature of created spirit, never ascribes to it any other finality than a supernatural one."¹¹ We were made for God. Jean Danielou made cultural application of this idea by arguing that man is already by nature religious.¹² If we had not become such secularized Calvinists — that, after all, is what a great slice of American history is all about — we could see that, without revelation at all, man is already by nature a creature who prays, worships, and acknowledges his dependence on some Other. In the order of nature therefore a good government has the responsibility not to remain indifferent on the question of religion but to foster this along with man's other natural orientations, to knowledge, beauty, and virtue, above all. It is as much — more — an obligation of a good state, all questions of revelation aside, to foster religion as it is to educate its people. We stand late in a process in which the function of the state has been largely reconceived as the pursuit of freedom rather than the pursuit of good — this of course was inevitable when we no longer could agree on the good — and thus we can hardly psychologically take seriously such a view. Pluralism in this sense makes the fullness of human life impossible, and none of us, myself included, can see this condition of life as likely to disappear.

Declaration on Religious Freedom

Perhaps, to anticipate objections, a few words are in order about *Dignitatis Humanae*, the "Declaration on Religious Freedom" of Vatican II. It is clear, whatever those like Archbishop Lefebvre have said about this document's teaching new and erroneous things, that its explicit intention is to bring "forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old (1)."¹³ The primary new thing is "that in the course of time men have come more widely to recognize their dignity as persons, and the conviction has grown stronger that the person in society is to be kept free from all manner of coercion in matters religious (12)." Yet the document insists on balancing a number of competing interests, above all the freedom of the Church, the religious freedom of the individual, and the need of civil society for order and civility.¹⁴ I think it fair to say that none of these rights are understood as absolute: each must be pursued in a manner that does not undermine the others. The qualifying phrase is common: "No one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits (2)." Again: "Injury . . . is done to the human person . . . if the free exercise of religion is denied when the just requirements of public order do not so require (3)." Because of this — that is, because the articulation of religious freedom involves prudential judgments about the relation between various kinds of right — *Dignitatis Humanae* is necessarily vague about most matters going beyond questions of principle. Nevertheless, at several points it articulates certain limiting ideas, and I would argue that everything proposed in the present essay is both within the boundaries thus set down, and an expression of the document's major thrust.

First, from the beginning the document declares "that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men (1)," and frequently *Dignitatis Humanae* returns to the obligation of Christians to the missionary enterprise, while insisting that this must not be a coercive process. Lest anyone doubt, the document declares that "it leaves

untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ (1)." More directly related to the question of Christian culture are declarations such as that men "are bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth (2)." Since the document repeatedly insists on the social nature of man, it seems fair to conclude that public ordering of the believers' lives is intended: "The social nature of man . . . requires that he should give external expression to his internal acts of religion: that he should share with others in matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community (3)." Undoubtedly what is primarily intended here is the right to public worship and practice of one's religion, but, and I would stress this, the document is explicitly opposed to the neutrality of government in religious matters. "Government therefore ought . . . to take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor, since the function of government is to make provision for the common welfare (3)." Even more explicitly: "Government is . . . to help create conditions favorable to the fostering of religious life . . . (6)."

Finally, and I need for my purposes go no further than this: "If in view of peculiar circumstances obtaining among peoples, special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional order of society, it is at the same time imperative that the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom should be recognized . . . (6)." That is, contrary to the claims of many American interpreters of this document, it not only is against a religiously neutral government, it allows the possibility of a confessional state. Because my hopes for the present age are generally much more modest than the latter, by definition everything I have proposed is not only within the bounds of what *Dignitatis Humanae* understands as possible constitutional arrangements under which an acceptable religious freedom may be found, but more importantly are in the spirit of the positive relation between government and religion envisioned by that document.

My point, to return to the larger argument, is that it is one thing to accept the seeming inevitability of the disappearance of Christendom, to understand the compelling reasons why the First Amendment was necessary, to see what some have called "civil religion" as the political bottom line to which religion in America must adjust, and to note the continuing privatization of religion and secularization of life; it is quite another thing to see this as a progress, and to become apologists for the process. Here one must admire a kind of half-seeing immigrant stance that at once used the First Amendment for self-protection, yet understood that the status of Other was inevitable as long as Catholics retained a more integrated and public form of Christianity than they found in this Protestant land. By resisting the political bottom line of the First Amendment, that in America all in religion that is incompatible with a shared political life must be jettisoned or privatized, a kind of Catholic subculture was maintained. John F. Kennedy is as good a symbol as any of the abandonment of this attempt to maintain a tail-end Catholic subculture.¹⁵

Embodiment in Cultural Forms

I have no illusion that any of these processes can be reversed, and know that we must go forward from the present moment, to capture what good we can in what is to come. Yet there is some merit to — as they say — having our heads on straight,

to seeing genuine evils as evil. It is perhaps unfair and callous for me, an adult convert, to dwell on the disaster of the Americanization of the Catholic ethnic groups, and of course this is a story by no means unique to our century or country. I do not see how it could have been avoided, this selling of one's inheritance for a mess of pottage. But is it not quite another matter so to assimilate as to embrace opinions which make an embodied faith impossible? It seems to me that, as much as for any earlier generation, the realization of our full humanity lies in the embodiment of our beliefs in cultural forms, not of course as the end of Catholic life, but as one of its expressions. America is no more a democracy than a monarchy. It is a potpourri that cannot be characterized by any classical label. Plutarch said that Rome had a mixed form of government; this is no less true of us. While we can see that we are not a monarchy, we have trouble seeing that we are also not a democracy. The word, rather, operates for us in a normative way, not describing what we are but the ideals to which we commit ourselves. My suggestion is that the notion of an embodied Christianity should play for Catholics the role that "democracy" has come to mean for most Americans.¹⁶ That is, as most Americans in their sober moments recognize that we are not democratically governed, yet continue to make concrete decisions they believe will make them "more democratic"; I would like Catholics to see that the First Amendment is at once, granted the fateful decision that a shared political experience is more important than a shared religion, historically necessary, protective of minorities, and humanly damaging.

First Amendment as Anti-Religious

I would like to see them gain some critical distance from those Americanist ideals after which they have so longed, with the longing of the poor immigrant to be accepted, so that they can see the First Amendment not as religiously neutral, but as the establishment of a Protestant notion of society, that is, of a society in which religion is privatized. I would like them to see that the First Amendment is antireligious and anti-Catholic, that it wounds any person who wishes to live a full life in which the private and public are integrated. I have no expectation of reviving anything like a traditional, vaguely unitary Catholic culture, but what of the venerable categories of Exile and Pilgrimage? Should we not see ourselves as ill at ease in this culture that toleration has made necessary?

Can we not capitalize on the emphasis of Vatican II on the People of God always on the one hand hoping for some publicly shared life and some influence on the larger society, but also knowing that all cultural arrangements are temporary, and that our first obligation is to embody the truth as best we can, in ourselves and in social groupings less than the whole? It would be a real advance to see America not as the Promised Land, except insofar as it was and is a haven for the oppressed elsewhere; not as the achievement of the finest political arrangement that man has discovered; but as a culture like all others understandable in and in great measure dictated by historical context. In this time and place we must continue the one thing necessary to embody Christ in our own lives. The culture of one life is already a culture, the culture of one Catholic family is a more public culture, the culture of a committed group of Christians, perhaps *Communione e Liberazione*, is again more public, and who can know where it will end? As Augustine said, "We are the times: such as we are, such are the times."¹⁷

FOOTNOTES

1. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*. A Biography (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969), p. 236.
2. *Ibid.*
3. For Augustine's views on discipline, I am following Brown, *Augustine*, pp. 237-238, who personally is alarmed by Augustine's views. I am working on several studies which touch both Augustine's changing ideas of what man is, and of the place of the body in Christian thought, but for now see n. 11 above and "From Bede to the Anglo-Saxon Presence in the Carolingian Empire," in *Angli e Sassone al di qua e al di la del Mare*, 2 vols. (Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 32; Spoleto, 1986), I, pp. 305-382.
4. I refer in the first instance to the theology of the body developed in John Paul II's Wednesday audience talks beginning in 1979, on which one reflection is Mary G. Durkin, *Feast of Love: Pope John Paul II on Human Intimacy* (Chicago, 1983), and in the second, social or cultural, instance, to the policy of so-called Catholic Restoration (a poor label, if taken to imply that an earlier historical situation can be reobtained) which, although aimed primarily at the reinvigoration of the Church, also aims at a more sensitive embodiment of Christianity, through a missionary enterprise, in the diverse culture of the world. One may begin with the popular essay of Paul Johnson, *Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Restoration* (London, 1982). For introduction to both John Paul II's understanding of sexuality and of Christian culture, see Andrew N. Woznicki, *The Dignity of Man as a Person: Essays on the Christian Humanism of His Holiness John Paul II* (San Francisco, 1987). Woznicki's lucid discussion of the relation of freedom to truth in John Paul's thought is relevant to what is said in n. 11 above. On the idea of the "holy palpable," see also James Hitchcock, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (New York, 1974).
5. *Letter 185*, 19, tr. Parsons, pp. 159-160.
6. Leo XIII, "On Christian Citizenship," 28, ed. Etienne Gilson, *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII* (Garden City, N.Y., 1954), p. 262. Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988), is very instructive. See also Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion* (New York, 1967), p. 187. with Baker, *Affairs of Party*, p. 274, on the "mythologization of the people," and of sovereignty, and n. 50 below. Martin, *Secularization*, p. 29, argues "that [American] civil religion also illustrates a basic Protestant tendency, which is the cumulative character of a legitimation whatever the logical contradictions of the component parts."
7. How different from the vagueness of this romantic view is the account of the economic forces generating changes in early forms of leadership given by Barry Cunliffe, *Greeks, Romans, and Barbarians: Spheres of Interaction* (New York, 1988).
8. R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 16-23: "The church was a compulsory society in precisely the same way as a modern state is a compulsory society (p. 17)."
9. I have criticized the recent espousal of Murray's ideas by a number of conservative writers in the study listed in n. 4 above. and see the quotations in n. 50 below.
10. Thomas O'Brien Hanley, *Their Rights and Liberties: The beginnings of religion and political freedom in Maryland* (Chicago, 1984), analyzes the revolution forged by the Maryland colonists from 1634 to 1649. See n. 7 above for my criticisms. One of the best presentations of American Catholic history is Philip Gleason, *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism, Past and Present* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1987). Martin, *Secularization*, p. 19, notes that "Catholics in Protestant societies have allied themselves to the political left [even if militantly secularist, for protecting oneself as a minority is of the first importance], except of course that Protestant societies do not breed militant secularism, or indeed a militant left. It is monopoly, above all Catholic monopoly, which ensures abrasive division and militant secularism." In making such useful observations, Martin may undervalue the seriousness with which ideas are taken in a religion — an evidence which will be the attempt to implement them in society — as a decisive factor in whether it generates a secularizing opposition (or a left).
11. Balthasar, "Achievement of Henri de Lubac," p. 25.
12. See the studies by Danielou and myself in n. 7 above. Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Church and Culture Since Vatican II: The Experiences of North and Latin America* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1985), gives some idea of the range of recent approaches, and in Pt. II recent "Documents of the Church on Culture." For the idea of "evangelizing culture" developed at the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate at Puebla in 1979, see the articles in *30 Days* (Jan., 1989), esp. Alver Metallii, "And Meanwhile the Cities are Becoming Pagan," 48-51, with the responses the following month, esp. Horacio Vignolo, "For Us 'Evangelizing Culture' is

- not a Slogan," 51-52, Alberto Methol Ferre, "Secularism and the Poor," 54-55, and Bonaventura Kloppenburg, "Secularism is Increasing, but not in Latin America," 57. Cf. Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge, La., 1989).
13. All quotations from *Dignitatis Humanae*, here I, N.C. Translation, comp. J. L. Gonzalez and the Daughters of St. Paul, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II* (Boston, n.d.). See my "The Catholic Moment," pp. 476-477, and n. 7 above.
14. See for instance *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7 ("Men are to deal with their fellows in justice and civility." "These [juridical norms which are in conformity with the objective moral order] arise out of the need for the effective safeguard of the rights of all citizens and for the peaceful settlement of conflicts or rights, also out of the need for an adequate care of genuine public peace, which comes about when men live together in good order and in true justice, and finally out of the need for a proper guardianship of public morality."), 13 ("Therefore, a harmony exists between the freedom of the Church and the religious freedom which is to be recognized as the right of all men and communities and sanctioned by constitutional law.").
15. See n. 6 above (*30 Days*). *Communio* 3 (Summer, 1976) is devoted to the question of Catholicism in American culture. On the First Amendment itself, see Leonard Levy, *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment* (New York, 1986). For civil religion see Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American civil religion in a time of trial* (New York, 1975); and, with Phillip E. Hammond, ed., *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco, 1980). Martin, *Secularization*, pp. 16-18, draws instructive comparisons between duopolistic countries like Holland, where allies shift according to issue, and countries in which Catholicism dominates, where irreconcilable parties are permanently hostile, separated by the question of irreligion. Cf. Clebsch, *Sacred to Profane*, pp. 16-17, 19, 207-218, for the description of the U.S. as "Polypolitan," benignly viewed.
16. For origins see Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence, Kans., 1985). Michael Lienesch, *New Order of the Ages: Time, the Constitution, and the Making of Modern American Political Thought* (Princeton, 1988), in addressing the much controverted question of whether the Founding Fathers were republicans or liberals, rightly stresses the inconsistency of the ideas enshrined in the American Constitution, and thus of American politics ever after. Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987), traces the relative displacement of republicanism, and see Kloppenberg, "Virtues of Liberalism," a perceptive essay, good on the varieties of liberalism, although conceiving religion in a very American way: "Virtue in various forms lay at the heart of Christian doctrine" (p. 12). Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968), esp. Ch. 1, and Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York, 1969) (see index under "Mixed government" on the meaning of this term specific to the eighteenth century), are seminal works here. Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790's* (New York, 1984), is useful on the idea of equality as a premise followed in much later American thought. What Stuart Hampshire, "Engaged Philosopher," *The New York Review of Books* 36, 1 (Feb. 2, 1989), 7-9, at 9, says of democracy and war could be given more general application: "There is an ideology of democracy that is as deceiving as the ideologies of capitalism and of communism. This ideology suggests that, given democratic institutions, the people as a whole, through their representatives in the Congress, and perhaps also through public opinion polls, are able to make their wishes known on the acceptability of any specific risk of war when it arises." Further, in regard to why serious questions cannot be discussed in U.S. presidential campaigns: "Most voters recognize constraints such as this [no one can be seen as 'soft on defense'] in a spirit of controlled contempt for such democratic elections."
17. Sermon 80, quoted in Markus, *Saeculum*, pp. 40-41.

Notes from Original Numbering Referred to in Notes for the latter part of the article:

7. Jean Danielou, *Prayer as a Political Problem*, ed. and tr. by J. R. Kirwan (New York, 1967), with my "You Can't Legislate Morality": Reflections on a Bromide," *Communio* 2 (Summer, 1975), 148-162; Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (New York, 1967); Hans Urs von Balthasar's lifework is in many ways an embodiment of his ideas on grace, but see especially *The Theology of Karl Barth*, tr. John Drury (New York, 1971), esp. Pt. 4, and "The Achievement of Henri de Lubac," *Thought* 51 (1976) 7-50, esp. 24-29.
11. See Glenn W. Olsen, "St. Augustine and the Problem of the Medieval Discovery of the Individual," *Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review* 9 (1987), 129-156, and n. 35 below. [In the revised numbering to accommodate the abbreviated article, this is now note 4.]