

The Church and Secularity

Two Stories of Liberal Society



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Introduction

This book is concerned with the relationship of the Catholic Church to contemporary liberal societies. It seeks to explore the meaning of secularity as a shared space for all citizens and to ask how the Church can contribute to sensitivity to and respect for human dignity within liberal societies. In particular, it considers the ambivalence of human freedom in those societies and explores how the Church can assist in the expression of freedom as the wellspring of the common good rather than as a self-assertion that degrades communal and social relationships.

In a liberal society, all individuals are accorded certain rights, but the laws and institutions of society are agnostic about the transcendental foundations of those rights. They are simply an ethical given—the ethical premise of laws and political procedures, without any shared transcendental foundation of their own. There are good reasons for this, since liberal societies are secular and pluralist societies. To give such shared transcendental foundations a politically established status might privilege a particular religious tradition and threaten the religious freedom that is essential to a liberal society. It would also be harmful to the Church itself, since such privileges undermine the free appeal that evangelization makes to conscience.

Yet it is also true that this “givenness” is limited and fragile. The claim that every human being has worth and dignity is controversial in a host of ways: in its scope, in its limits, and in its application. In particular, the freedom that is at the core of human dignity is interpreted in crucially different ways, especially in terms of the tension between conceptions of individual autonomy and a willingness to support the common good. Its sheer “givenness”—its lack of transcendental

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content—can also affect the motivation of members of society to defend human dignity and their hope that this defense, this commitment, will not be in vain. The lack of a transcendental context can isolate the appeal to human dignity: it makes a transcendental claim without being able to link this claim to a comprehensive vision of reality. This can render it vulnerable to the force of more palpable and pragmatically demonstrable claims, which sacrifice human dignity in favor of economic, ethnic, class, power, and other imperatives.

The aim of this book is to consider how the Christian church can serve the cause of human dignity in this social and political context. While retaining its own prophetic freedom from state authority, how can it help to support the claims of human dignity: to respond to its force, to strengthen and broaden its content, to reinforce commitment, and to inspire hope that this commitment is not in vain?

The freedom that is fundamental to liberal societies can be the source and guarantee of the love, solidarity, and respect that make authentic community possible. Liberal society, refraining from imposed traditions of meaning and social hierarchies, has the potential to encourage the free development of communities based on mutual respect and affinity, without the intrusion of rank and the temptations of hypocrisy. Yet it is also true that the disengagement of individual freedom from socially reinforced traditions of meaning and the expectations of social custom can become the rejection of any meaning and value outside the ego, the mere assertion of the desire to dominate, control, and consume, the destruction of the ethical substance that enables individuals to develop and express themselves in a social milieu. In this sense, liberal society can and does tell two stories: a positive story of freedom of conscience and the development of unconstrained community, as well as a negative story of self-centeredness, vacuity, and the commodification of human values.

A key part of the Church's service to liberal societies is in the assistance it can give in strengthening the first, positive story of liberal society, in developing understandings of human freedom as the fundamental potential for community and creativity, rather than as destructive self-assertion. The Christian faith's own understanding of freedom, as the response to God's gift of life and love, can serve and

nourish all expressions of freedom in liberal society that are oriented to mutual respect and just relationships. Within the culture of liberal societies, the Christian faith's vision of the meaning and purpose of human existence can help limit the destructive potential of freedom, its rejection of anything but the self-aggrandizement and self-abasement of the ego.

Two texts are of particular importance for the argument of this book: Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*; and Augustine's *City of God*. It is guided by the vision of the Church and its role in the world that is articulated in *Gaudium et spes*, finding in this document an inspiring and illuminating perspective on the Church as a witness to Christ and servant of humanity. It interprets Augustine's *City of God* as a classic resource for the illumination of the ambivalent character of freedom and for living in the shared space of secularity, taking issue with those readings that interpret this text as essentially a rejection of the legitimacy of secularity in favor of ecclesial existence. It argues that the central concern of the *City of God* is not a contrast between Church and state, but rather a fundamental contrast between two meanings of freedom, based in two different loves: the love of God and neighbor, and the love of self. Because the *City of God* reflects on the meaning of freedom as expressed in these two radically different loves, it has much to say to our contemporary experience of the ambivalence of freedom in liberal societies. It will be evident that this book is not a work of Augustine scholarship: rather, it seeks to learn from a number of Augustine scholars in order to benefit from the insights of the *City of God*, most explicitly in the first and third chapters of the book.

It is important to note that this book does not set out to be a discussion of different philosophies of liberalism, but rather seeks to reflect on the essential features of liberal societies themselves, namely, the foundational importance of individual freedom and of human rights, whether articulated in normative statements of rights or protected by convention and common law. Clearly, these essential features of liberal societies have a number of historical sources, including philosophical sources, which, in turn, have complex and controversial relationships to Christian tradition and the churches. This book does not seek

substantially to engage in the important debates about this complex history. It focuses rather on the character of liberal societies, as a form of political life, with the perspective that societies based in personal freedom and human rights are a precious historical heritage. Encouraged by the endorsement of liberal societies in the documents of Vatican II, especially because of their transcendental roots in freedom of conscience, it seeks to explore the fundamental challenges they face and the ways in which the Church can serve humanity and bear witness to Jesus of Nazareth by helping to maintain and strengthen the ethical project of a society that respects human rights.

This book is written in the context of Catholic theology, and, especially in the final chapter, is particularly concerned with the relationship of the Catholic Church to liberal societies. The argument does, however, engage with, and has—I hope—greatly benefited from, many writers of other Christian traditions, and it is concerned with questions that affect the role and significance in the contemporary world of Christian faith as a whole.

The first chapter begins by considering the ambivalence of freedom in liberal society. It argues that a key characteristic of liberal society is the disestablishment of tradition as a constraint on individual action. This freedom from tradition-as-constraint can enable the deployment of tradition-as-resource: the free development of patterns of life and community through a social dialogue that benefits from the insights and practices embodied in traditions. Tradition-as-resource can be the source of an “ontology of the human” that is crucial to the ethical life of liberal societies. Yet the disestablishment of tradition-as-constraint can also lead to the rejection of all tradition as an imposition on individual freedom, so that freedom is understood as the denial of any ontology of the human and is exercised purely as unconstrained and self-assertive choice. The argument of this chapter then considers two key works that reflect on the origins of this situation in the demise of Christendom: Oliver O’Donovan’s *The Desire of the Nations* and Charles Taylor’s *A Catholic Modernity?*¹ While both of these authors emphasize the ambivalence of freedom in modern societies, they have very different appraisals of Christendom and the reasons for its demise. The chapter concludes by considering the light that the *City of*

God can shed on this ambivalence of freedom and on secularity as a shared social and political space. In particular, it seeks to interpret the “two cities,” inspired by two loves—the love of God and neighbor, and the love of self—as a means of understanding the “two stories” of liberal societies.

Chapter two argues that it is an essential aspect of the Church’s identity to commit itself to supporting human dignity and human rights in liberal, secular society. The tension between Christian identity and a commitment to universal ethical ideals is explored through a theological reflection on the relationship between Church and Kingdom and Christ and the Spirit in human history, against the backdrop of Joachim da Fiore’s theology of history, and in critical debate with the work of Andrew Shanks and William Cavanaugh. The chapter argues for a conception of the Church that retains both its identity as discipleship of Jesus Christ and its mission of solidarity with all human beings, based in a theology of the anonymous presence of Christ in every human person, as articulated in *Gaudium et spes*.

Chapter three argues that the two stories of freedom in liberal societies can be summed up in terms of the contrast between instrumental and noninstrumental relationships. It seeks to learn from the insights of the *City of God* to develop a theology of the virtues of noninstrumental relationships in a Christological perspective. It explores the ways in which the virtues of humility, reverence, and self-giving at the risk of self-loss are crucial to the expression of freedom in community, and argues that the Church’s proclamation of Christ as the definitive embodiment of these virtues is a fundamental service to liberal societies.

A liberal society is essentially an ethical project that must be strengthened and inspired by hope in order to flourish and survive. Chapter four reflects on the ways in which Christian hope can serve this project for the sake of human community. In dialogue with John Rawls’s essay “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” it considers the possibilities for the communication of Christian hope in the “public political forum” and the “background culture” of liberal societies. Christian hope has its most powerful source and focus in the Eucharist; yet for many in liberal societies, religious ritual is irrelevant to the

ethical project of respect for human dignity. The chapter concludes by arguing that the Christian Eucharist, the memory and celebration of Christ's paschal mystery, can communicate hope in the face of the temptation to despair at the gulf between universal ethical ideals and the frightening evidence of their failure.

The earlier chapters of this book are concerned with the ways in which the Christian Church can both bear witness to Christ and serve liberal societies. The fifth and final chapter is concerned with how, in the post-1960s age, this relationship to liberal societies is also critical to the Catholic Church's own processes of identity-formation. From the French Revolution to the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church was characterized by processes of demarcation and mobilization in response to the dominance of liberal anticlerical elites in many European countries and Protestant hegemony in the British Empire and the United States. Vatican II gave the sanction of the Church's highest authority to a new stance in relation to liberal societies, one expressed in particular in the documents *Dignitatis humanae* and *Gaudium et spes*. This stance—of witness to Christ in solidarity with universal humanity—has extraordinary evangelical and ethical promise. Yet it also makes great challenges, both in maintaining a communal and universalist perspective despite the individualist economic dynamics of liberal societies, and in avoiding forms of identity that give highest priority to demarcation from some secular interpretations of personal autonomy in sexual and life ethics. The book concludes with the argument that the Church's own social identity, rooted in Eucharist communities, should be bound up with the struggle for human rights and the resistance to commodification of the human in all its forms.

Note

1. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).



CHAPTER ONE

Two Stories of Liberal Society

The Ambivalence of Freedom in Liberal Society

A key characteristic of a liberal society is its ambivalence, its propensity to tell two stories. The first of these stories is of individual freedom as the source of creativity and diversity, as the warrant of critical reason to constantly reform social institutions for the sake of the common good; this story proclaims the right of even the most apparently insignificant to make their voices heard in the debates that concern their destiny. The other story is of freedom as a voluntarism that destroys the ethical and cultural substance of tradition, leaving only the emptiness of self-indulgent whim; it is a story of a society with astonishingly sophisticated means of communication but with little more than trivia and sensationalism to communicate. This ambivalence about freedom suggests a particular role for the Christian church in the context of liberal societies: to assist those societies in telling their positive story of freedom by illuminating the sources of freedom in human dignity and by acting in solidarity with all those who commit themselves to enhancing our consciousness of this dignity and to giving it practical effect.

By a liberal society, I mean a society in which the invocation of tradition is not sufficient to constrain or limit individual freedom. I understand the contrast between liberal and traditional societies to be the contrast between a society that gives priority to individual freedom and one that gives priority to certain forms of behavior that express a society's past and give it social unity. In a traditional society, these forms of behavior are not merely options or recommendations, but practices that are associated with strong expectations, constraints, and sanctions, such that if an individual were to ignore them they would experience, to varying degrees, social exclusion or anomie. A

liberal society is one in which, in principle, all limitations on individual behavior need to be justified by social argument, rather than by the invocation of tradition. A fundamental aspect of social tradition is religion, so a liberal society is a secular society insofar as it does not establish any religion or impose any religious test on public office. In this sense, the secular character of society consists above all in freedom of conscience in religious matters, in the elimination of any link between state power and religious affiliation.

A liberal society is one kind of modern society. A hallmark of modernity is the weakening or abolition of tradition as a constraint: A liberal society is that kind of modern society in which tradition can be freely adopted by individuals, in contrast to those societies in which the abolition of tradition has left a vacuum to be filled by various kinds of authoritarianism or totalitarianism, some of which may include elements of tradition—such as religion or the nation—taken out of their traditional context and transformed into instruments of total control. A liberal society is also by its nature a democratic society, although not all democratic societies have been liberal societies to the same degree, since in many of them social traditions have continued to exercise very strong constraints or modernizing political forms have abrogated traditional freedoms.¹ A liberal society is one in which individual freedom has priority over social unity, whether that unity be imposed by tradition or by modernizing institutions and ideologies.

In a liberal society, the dwindling force of tradition leaves the individual free to act in ways that were impossible in traditional societies. In the first place, individuals can form freely chosen communities, without the constraints of ethnic or class identity. They can choose life-goals that go beyond the boundaries of traditional expectations and norms. They can fashion diverse forms of life that express individual creativity and aspiration. They can choose from a range of possibilities that may have been denied them by a traditionally prescribed social order.

Yet, in order to fashion forms of life, to attempt human fulfillment, they will also be informed by the content of tradition—no longer as constraint and taboo, but as a historically formed portrait of human possibilities, a lived and tested set of practices that enable personal

development. In a liberal society, tradition becomes available as resource rather than as constraint, as a guide to the task of becoming an individual. Tradition as resource is a social argument, which, in a liberal society, is conducted in a pluralist context, making various traditions of human fulfillment available for admiration, scrutiny, and mutual critique marked by civil discourse.

The abolition of tradition as an assertive and stifling constraint, and the availability of tradition as a dialogic social resource, characterizes the best features of liberal society. In this sense a liberal society is characterized by both negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom, or freedom from constraint, allows individuals to make a range of choices concerning their self-fulfillment and life-goals. Positive freedom, or the freedom to fulfill certain purposes of human existence, is grounded in the willingness to accept certain constraints—such as various forms of moral discipline or commitments to communal and personal fidelity—in order to achieve these purposes. The awareness of these purposes of human existence, and their potential for human fulfillment, are embodied in tradition as a social resource. Tradition as social resource mediates a range of conceptions of human fulfillment, or the human good, that can be freely chosen by individuals.

These various traditions of the human good offer resources for an “ontology of the human,” a conception of human nature and potential that understands freedom as fulfilled in a variety of complementary relationships based in the virtues. Through the virtues of respect for others, fidelity in relationships, solidarity with those in need, and care for nonhuman nature, human beings are able to fulfill their personal moral potential. This ontology of the human is grounded in the human person him- or herself, in the human dignity of each human being, which makes a moral claim on all others.²

Because positive freedom always depends on tradition-as-resource, on a social argument, it is constantly contested. In particular, the meaningfulness of any ontology of the human, beyond the assertion of individual freedom itself, is the subject of constant debate, argument, and negotiation. Should equality in the exercise of freedom, essential to a liberal society, also extend to substantial forms of socio-economic equality? What kinds of legal respect should various kinds

of interpersonal commitment, such as marriage, enjoy? How much of their economic resources should individuals relinquish in order to support the disabled and marginalized? Should members of society have the right to end the lives of other human beings under certain conditions?

The answers to these questions can only be given through civil discourse among the members of liberal societies. This discourse will draw constantly on the resources of traditions, and religious traditions have played and will continue to play a very significant part in this. Yet for many members of liberal societies, tradition-as-resource can look suspiciously like tradition-as-constraint. Beyond the claim to individual freedom, any notion of an ontology of the human is experienced—in different ways by different people—as groundless and intolerable. Claims to socioeconomic equality are rejected as unwarranted restrictions on individual economic power, and the commitments of interpersonal and communal bonds are deemed secondary to individual self-expression and self-disposition.

The freedom of a liberal society can be interpreted not as the overcoming of tradition-as-constraint by tradition as a freely adopted resource, but rather as the overcoming of tradition as such, when traditions are experienced as sources of a spurious and restrictive ontology of the human. Even tradition as a socially continuous debate is rejected, since such a notion of tradition is linked to a sense of positive freedom, to a sense that we can identify certain purposes of human fulfillment. From this perspective, freedom is interpreted purely and exclusively as absence of constraint, as freedom of choice, since anything else is an imposition on the possibilities of individual freedom. Freedom is no longer the possibility of personally appropriating tradition in order to fulfill human potential, but rather it is the rejection of all tradition in order to exercise choice itself.

In this case, freedom becomes its own object and justification: Its meaning lies purely in the experience of unrestricted choice, which is, as much as possible, the experience of unrestricted power. Choice becomes its own justification, without any need to appeal to a traditional wisdom of human fulfillment. Communal or faithful choices are no better than selfish or solipsistic preferences. Choices that lead

individuals to a higher or deeper form of life are no better than those that are about instinctual gratification. At its worst, this becomes simply an experience of the ego itself—the dominant, restless, consuming ego—since everything in the world is experienced as restraint on the ego. This can oscillate between self-assertion of the ego—and the experience of power that accompanies it—and the ego’s terror at itself, in the realization that it has no content and no meaning other than the experience of arbitrary choice. When freedom takes this guise, we witness the denial and evacuation of any ontology of the human, resulting in individualism instead of solidarity in community, and in depersonalization rather than fidelity and commitment in sexual and other interpersonal relationships.

Thus we experience a conflict between two notions of freedom in liberal societies: freedom as the creative, personal appropriation of tradition, expressing an ontology of the human as the outcome of a process of social debate; and freedom purely as freedom of choice, where all choices are equal because there is no ontology of the human, no realm of meaning to inform them, and where the ego relates to the world around it only through domination or consumption, or else cripples itself through various forms of addiction. Because both of these options are possibilities of freedom, we constantly witness both of them in liberal societies, where the scope of freedom has been made all the greater by modernity’s disestablishment of tradition and by its technological power.

In this sense, liberal societies do tell two stories. Because both of these stories are so evident in our experience, and because the difference between them is so great, both anecdotal and more reflective responses to liberal society vary markedly. Evidence justifying both the essentially humane and positive as well as the essentially narcissistic and shallow character of liberal society can easily be presented. The reality of both of these possibilities, and the stark differences between them, make clear how demanding the project of a liberal society is. Such a society faces the constant challenge of re-appropriating tradition, in the face of changing circumstances and experiences, in order to shape a moral consensus concerning the meaning and purpose of human freedom. Parts of this task must be faced by government,

insofar as some dimensions of an ontology of the human, especially those concerned with the balance of freedom and equality, must have a legal expression. Much of the task must be taken up by society as a cultural forum in continuous conversation about what expressions of human freedom will enable civilization to continue as a truly humane project. In whatever context it is pursued, the project of a liberal society requires constant dedication and discernment.³

The Demise of Christendom and the Ambivalence of Freedom

We can understand the nature of this task better by considering the roots of contemporary liberal societies in that earlier relationship between Christianity and European society usually called Christendom. This can help us understand what liberal societies owe to Christendom, why Christendom ended, and why the development of liberal societies from Christendom has been marked by this profound ambivalence of freedom. Two important works can assist us in this reflection: Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* and Charles Taylor's *A Catholic Modernity*.⁴ These books consider the disparities between Christendom and liberal societies in significantly different ways, and both address the ambivalence of liberal modernity.

For O'Donovan, the legitimacy of all political authority after the resurrection and exaltation of Christ derives from Christ himself: "Christ's victory . . . is the same victory that was promised to Israel over the nations, the victory of a God-filled and humanised social order over bestial and God-denying empires, a victory won for Israel on behalf of all mankind."⁵ The reign of Christ means that the only political authority left to secular power is the power of making just judgments, since other governmental rights are "overwhelmed by the immediate claim of the Kingdom."⁶ O'Donovan makes the striking claim that the concept of the "state" itself derives from Christ's victory. He argues that it was a concept "unknown to the ancient world because it describes something new, a form of political authority which has come to understand itself differently as a result of Christ's triumph."⁷ Only

after Christ was a distinction necessary between the limited authority of the organs of government, subject to Christ, and another source of authority, the Church.

According to O'Donovan, this conception of the limited role of the state—as the steward of justice subjected to the rule of Christ—was the most valuable feature of Christendom. Although Christendom was prone to the dangers of “negative collusion, the pretence that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ,” it was able to foster the ancient prophetic ideal of nations subject to God’s Law.⁸ In the early modern world—in what O'Donovan describes as “the last and greatest of the legal accomplishments of Christendom”—this was expressed as an “international law, dependent on no regime and no statute, but on the Natural Law implanted in human minds by God, and given effect by international custom and convention.”⁹

For O'Donovan, the First Amendment to the American Constitution can be taken as an indication of the end of Christendom, since it explicitly ruled out the establishment of any religion. Although it was enacted by Christians, in order to prevent government interference in the life of the church, it “ended up promoting a concept of the state’s role from which Christology was excluded, that of a state of freedom from all responsibility to recognise God’s self-disclosure in history.”¹⁰ It was in fact heretical, since it denied the Creed’s affirmation that Christ’s reign will have no end.¹¹ The effect of this was to “exclude government from evangelical obedience,” with “repercussions for the way society itself is conceived.”¹² The resulting idea of society “dissolves the unity and coherence” of the idea of justice “by replacing it with a plurality of rights.”¹³ According to O'Donovan, the key problem with this notion of rights is that they are conceived of subjectively and taken to be original rather than derived: “The right is a primitive endowment of power with which the subject first engages in society, not an enhancement which accrues to the subject from an ordered and politically formed society.”¹⁴

Despite liberal society’s rejection of the reign of Christ, it can embody some of the best features of Christendom, and O'Donovan believes that a Christian theologian can “venture to characterise a normative

political culture broadly in continuity with the Western liberal tradition.”¹⁵ Liberal society bears the marks of Christ’s rule in so far as it is marked by freedom of individual decision, by mercy in judgment, by equality, and by the “openness to speech” that has its key embodiment in representative parliaments. However, according to O’Donovan, this positive narrative of liberal society as expressive of the reign of Christ must be accompanied by a negative description of it as Antichrist, as “a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order.”¹⁶ Once society has been formed by the reign of Christ, it cannot simply regress to “naive malevolence”: rather, its possibilities of evil now have a demonic, Antichristic character.¹⁷ With its point of departure as “free choice,” liberal society as Antichrist destroys the objectivity of natural right, substituting the assertion of individual rights and wants, which in turn corrode and undermine community and render justice and punishment an arbitrary imposition on an individual’s “will for life and freedom.”¹⁸ These two “counter-interpretations of modernity,” expressing the reign of Christ and Antichrist, describe a crossroads, a moment of decision that is “what all civilizational description must aspire to in the era between Ascension and Parousia, the era mapped out from its beginnings by the seer of Patmos.”¹⁹

The point of departure for O’Donovan’s powerful account of the relationship between Christendom and modernity is the question of the legitimacy of political authority. Charles Taylor’s *A Catholic Modernity?* is marked by many similar concerns, but it is principally motivated by the question of the sources of moral commitment in liberal societies. Taking up the concluding theme of his *Sources of the Self*, Taylor’s concern is to reflect on the problem of motivation for the demanding moral commitments that have become characteristic of the “rights culture” of liberal societies.²⁰

Whereas O’Donovan regards the birth of liberal societies out of Christendom as originating in a heretical act of denial of Christ’s Lordship, Taylor argues that Christendom had to die in order to make the full universalization of the Gospel’s ethical meaning possible. Since Christendom was the attempt to incarnate the Gospel in particular societies, it inevitably cast the Gospel in ways that disadvantaged those of other faiths or of unacceptable morals. Because society involves

coercion, the attempt to embody any creed—including Christianity—in social forms will involve coercion.²¹ The end of Christendom made possible the full development of an ethical creed that had its principal source in the Gospel itself, the development of a “rights culture” that, “for all its drawbacks, had produced something quite remarkable, the attempt to call political power to book against a yardstick of fundamental human requirements, universally applied.”²²

According to Taylor, while the rights culture of modern liberalism owes so much to the Christian Gospel, it was also accompanied by the rise of “exclusive humanisms” that regard religion as harmful to those rights. For these “exclusive humanisms,” what is important is the flourishing of human life: Any claim that there is something beyond life, in this human, terrestrial sense, is perceived as a threat to this flourishing. Taylor sees this emphasis on the value of “ordinary life” as originating in the Reformation’s critique of Catholicism’s distinction between a higher, spiritual life, marked by celibacy and religious vows, and ordinary, secular married life, with its involvement in economic activity. Later, various forms of secular humanism applied this critique against Christianity itself, rejecting any appeal to higher, religious value in favor of an exclusive focus on human flourishing in a secular context. Taylor expresses this worldview in propositional terms: “1. that for us life, flourishing and driving back the frontiers of death and suffering are of supreme value; 2. that this wasn’t always so; it wasn’t so for our ancestors, or for people in other earlier civilizations; 3. that one of the things that stopped it from being so in the past was precisely a sense, inculcated by religion, that there were higher goals; and 4. that we have arrived at 1. by a critique and overcoming of (this kind of) religion.”²³ Liberal societies, deeply influenced by “exclusive humanisms,” still have some of the characteristics of a postrevolutionary order, a suspicion of anything that “smacks of the *ancien régime*,” that is, of any subordination of secular human flourishing to any purportedly higher or transcendental claims.²⁴

Therefore, the society that has resulted from this development has mingled within it “both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel.”²⁵ Its greatest moral strength is the development of a

universalist ethic that expresses an extension of moral concern without parallel in earlier times—an ethic expressed in such extraordinary examples of moral commitment as Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières. Yet this universal commitment, which seeks to include strangers across the globe in a community of moral concern, faces the question of its own moral sources: How can such a commitment be sustained? For Taylor, the most powerful secular source of such commitment is the sense of self-worth we derive from helping others out of a recognition of their human dignity.²⁶ Secular humanism emphasises the worth and potential of humanity and the value of philanthropy in making human flourishing possible.

Yet such philanthropy has a “Janus face”: if those who are being helped do not live up to our image of the human, we can come to despise them and, ultimately, to coerce them as passive material that must be forced into the form of our own ideals.²⁷ Likewise, in our passion for justice we can come to hate those we identify as the enemies of moral progress.²⁸ In this way, the horrors that the Enlightenment critique saw in the perversion of religious ideals through religious war became evident in secular humanism, in some cases with far worse effects. If “action for high ideals is not tempered, controlled and ultimately engulfed in an unconditional love of the beneficiaries, this ugly dialectic risks repetition.”²⁹

Just as O’Donovan recognizes both the Christic and Antichristic potential of modernity, Taylor sees a certain logic in the fact that the century of Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières is also the century of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that the “history of the twentieth century can be read either in a perspective of progress or in one of mounting horror.”³⁰ Although Christendom also gave ample demonstration of this “ugly dialectic” of human ennoblement and annihilation, Christian faith can offer a vision of the love of God that can heal it. This can be described in two ways, which have in fact the same meaning: “either as a love or compassion that is unconditional—that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself—or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God.”³¹ This vision of human worth based on the love of God, and thus independent of the demand to live up to a high ideal, is linked to

the profound commonality of the sense that “our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity.”³²

For Taylor, then, the challenge facing liberal society is to be open to the Gospel of the love of God as a sustaining source of moral concern. This can provide an inspiration for a culture of universal human rights. Although he shares with O’Donovan an interpretation of modernity as the conjunction of high ideals and totalitarian atrocity, *corruptio optimi pessima*, Taylor does not direct his criticism at the notion of human rights itself, but rather at the attempt to sunder them from a vision of humanity created in the image of God. For O’Donovan, who focuses on the question of authority as the political act “which can give moral form to a community by defining its commitment to the good,” the notion of subjective rights threatens to fragment the ethical substance of natural law, the greatest heritage of Christendom.³³ Subjective rights as “a primitive endowment of power” jeopardize the objective justice made possible for all nations by Christ’s reign.

How, then, can a Christian be faithful to Christ’s reign in this time that is irrevocably post-Christendom? In my judgment, the greatest strength of *The Desire of the Nations* is its insistence on the ways in which Christ’s triumph, as the anticipation of the Kingdom, must be understood not only as the legitimation of Christendom but also as the ultimate legitimation of political authority in liberal society. Daniel’s prophecy of the one “like a Son of Man” (Daniel 7:13) who would triumph over bestial empires has an uncanny contemporary relevance, calling to mind the United Nations’s recognition of human dignity as the wellspring for international peace and justice after the catastrophe of World War II and the yearning of oppressed peoples for rule “with a human face.”³⁴ Yet I do not share O’Donovan’s view of the opposition between subjective rights and natural law. If it is one “like a Son of Man” who is the source of divine justice, cannot the true meaning of “natural law” be found in the dignity of the human person, understood as a unique subject? If Christ’s rule is the rule of what is humane and the abolition of what is bestial, should we not find its touchstone in the dignity of the human person? If it is the human face of the one

“like a Son of Man” who brings justice, cannot a philosophy of the dignity of the human subject be seen, not as the rejection of Christology that O’Donovan finds in the American Constitution, but rather as a sign of the elevation of the human person that God made possible in Christ? In this sense, it is possible to see a polity based on human rights as an implicit recognition of the reign of Christ. Such a polity has, indeed, a stronger link to Christology than one based on less personalist conceptions of natural law, since it is based on the transcendence of the human person, rather than on the structures of law. It is open to an understanding of individual human dignity as grounded in a union with Christ, the Word-become-human. It recognizes that it is the human person, transformed in Christ, who is the touchstone of all law.

A key difficulty in O’Donovan’s account lies in the link between the end of Christendom and the development of liberal society. For O’Donovan, Christendom ended in a heretical act, when churchmen denied their own allegiance to Christ in a misconceived attempt to free the church from civil control. Yet the First Amendment was not a denial of the reign of Christ, but simply a denial of the political prerogatives of the established Church and of the British monarch within that Church. Because of the contradictions of an established church, Christ’s reign must now be understood and expressed in a different, implicit way, and that way was through the affirmation of the dignity of the human person. Catholic tradition has had to struggle with a similar process, moving from the nineteenth-century Papal insistence on state support for the Catholic Church, and the condemnation of religious freedom, to the recognition, in Vatican II’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis humanae)*, that the dignity of the person demands respect for the subjective rights of conscience and that political privileges for the Church undermine this respect.

O’Donovan does, of course, value individual freedom in his positive narrative of liberal society, but he sees the dangers of arbitrary voluntarism in its negative twin. Yet a statement of natural law in terms of universal human rights need not lead to arbitrary voluntarism: the subjectivity of human rights can be interpreted as the fundamental right to freedom and self-expression of the individual person. In a

crucial sense, the subjective dignity of the human person is prior to the objective right of the state. This subjective dignity is indeed a “primitive endowment of power” in the sense that it is a dignity that the individual has prior to and independent of any political authority. Yet its “primitive” character can be understood in the ultimate sense of being in the “image of God,” prior to any and all human civilization.

The dignity of the human subject gives the objective order of political institutions the character of intersubjectivity: Their laws and procedures are justified in terms of their ability to respect the freedom and equality of all. Human dignity gives such societies their moral foundation. At the same time, I share O’Donovan’s insistence that a social order faithful to Christ’s reign is not based on “subjective will” in the sense that the arbitrary will of the majority could abolish the human dignity of others. Rather, the inalienable dignity of the person must be enshrined—at least implicitly—as the basis of constitutional order, so that its abolition would mean the self-destruction of a free society. This is explicitly the case in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in the American and German constitutions.³⁵

If this is the case, a Christian can see a liberal society as faithful to Christ’s reign in so far as it respects the dignity of the human person as expressed in human rights. The extent to which such a society is compatible with an attenuated form of Christendom is interesting and complex, and the world provides many examples of varying constitutional roles for religion and churches in liberal societies, notably the contemporary British monarchy and its prerogatives and responsibilities in relation to the Church of England.

The profound moral ambivalence of liberal modernity that O’Donovan and Taylor eloquently describe is, in one sense, no more and no less than the ambivalence of human freedom itself, whose potential for good and ill has become dramatically clear in societies that give maximum scope to that freedom against a backdrop of accelerating technological power. Yet, as O’Donovan points out, it is not simply a matter of the moral ambiguity of human freedom at any stage of human history, but rather the ambiguity of a freedom elevated by the passion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. If, as Taylor emphasizes, the universal meaning of this freedom of the Gospel has become

clear and effective with the end of Christendom, then the moral ambiguity of modernity has a particularly intense and challenging character—something exemplified in the “culture wars” and moral anxiety that are familiar aspects of our cultural condition.

The Augustinian Heritage: The “Two Cities” as Two Loves

To come to terms with this moral ambiguity in the post-Christendom era, we now turn to the greatest classic of Christian reflection on civilization, Augustine’s *City of God*. Augustine wrote at the beginning of the epoch we call Christendom, but his conception of the relationship between Church and society was not marked by an expectation that any such fusion of Church, culture, and society would occur: part of his relevance for our situation is that he does not speak from the perspective of Christendom. In considering how the Church can help liberal society tell its better story in this post-Christendom age, it is illuminating to consider Augustine’s seminal analysis of the two stories of freedom: his conception of human, and indeed cosmic, history as a dramatic narrative of the conflict between two cities—the heavenly and the earthly. I want to argue that a key aspect of the continuing relevance of Augustine’s *City of God* lies in its portrayal of this ambivalence of freedom—freedom as the potential to choose a social ontology of love, or freedom as the *libido dominandi*, the “lust for domination.”

Some contemporary writers find support in the *City of God* for their rejection of the secular liberal state as a site for positive Christian action. According to this perspective, the state is equated with Augustine’s reprobate “earthly City”: It is only in the Church that a peaceful, Christian politics can be found.³⁶ Yet an equivalence of the visible Church with Augustine’s “heavenly city,” and of the state with his “earthly city,” is fundamentally flawed. Augustine noted that his use of the term “city” had an allegorical character, referring to moral rather than political entities: “I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God’s will. I also call these two classes the two cities, speaking allegorically.”³⁷ As R. W. Dyson has argued,

the “two cities” are not cities at all in the ordinary sense, but moral categories: cosmic communities united by what their members love. The two cities “are the two all-embracing categories into which God’s rational creation is divided throughout history. . . . The City of God is the society of grace: the entire community, past and present, of those who unfeignedly love God. It is the Church, but it is the Church in the broadest sense of the term.”³⁸ Nor can the state be identified with the reprobate “earthly City.” It is true that, for Augustine, the state exists because of sin; yet it also has the positive task of rectifying the damage caused by sin, and it is understood as a means of discipline.³⁹

In *Christianity and the Secular*, Robert Markus argues that the *City of God* is not a rejection of the legitimacy of the secular, but on the contrary a powerful argument for the acknowledgment of the secular as the earthly context for the Church’s existence as it awaits the *eschaton*.⁴⁰ The secular, for Augustine, is the “present age” (*saeculum*), in which the members of the heavenly and earthly cities live in an “inextricably intertwined state” in this temporal life.⁴¹

Markus notes that there have been two types of modern political thought that claim support in Augustine. One is secular liberalism, severing the direct relation between religion and the public realm; the other is “the tradition which would see the public sphere as founded or tied in one way or another to Christianity.”⁴² At the heart of this second perspective is the “radical equation of the secular with sin.”⁴³ Markus rightly takes John Milbank as a leading exponent of this view. For Milbank, the *civitas terrena* is not regarded by Augustine “as a ‘state’ in the modern sense of a sphere of sovereignty, preoccupied with the business of government. Instead, this *civitas*, as Augustine finds it in the present, is the vestigial remains of an entire pagan mode of practice, stretching back to Babylon.” The ends sought by this earthly city “are not merely limited, finite goods, they are those finite goods regarded without ‘referral’ to the infinite good, and, in consequence, they are unconditionally *bad* ends. The realm of the merely practical cut off from the ecclesial, is quite simply a realm of sin.”⁴⁴

Markus sums up Milbank’s interpretation of Augustine as the claim that there is “no neutral public sphere in which people can act politically without reference to ultimate ends.”⁴⁵ Markus acknowledges

that Augustine would have rejected any notion that individuals can perform morally indifferent actions, since all actions must be carried out with some reference to our ultimate ends, whether for salvation or damnation. But he denies that this rejection of “morally indifferent” or “neutral” action implies that Augustine rejected the possibility and legitimacy of a neutral *public sphere*, that is, practices, customs, and institutions that could constitute a shared context for action for members of both cities.⁴⁶ Within these shared institutions, members of the heavenly city could act in ways that referred “limited finite goods” to the infinite good: “it is absolutely clear that Augustine envisaged a possibility of acting morally, with God’s grace, within the framework of earthly political order.”⁴⁷ A striking example of this is Augustine’s praise for the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius I.⁴⁸

What is crucial, Markus argues, is to distinguish the two different senses of the “earthly City,” the *civitas terrena*, as this term is used in the *City of God*: first, the broader sense of the term, denoting the society on earth that comprises both virtuous and wicked members; and second, the narrower sense—which it usually has when Augustine defines it explicitly—of the mass of the reprobates. According to Markus, “a great deal of the confusion and the controversy over the ‘secular’ realm in Augustine’s thought arises from failure to distinguish the two senses that the ‘earthly City’ can bear in Augustine’s language.”⁴⁹ Those, like Milbank, who argue that Augustine rejected the legitimacy of the secular fail to make this distinction. For Markus, Augustine recognized that the Church lived within a “secular framework” that “demanded acknowledgement of its function and value, while at the same time it needed to be critically distanced and assessed within a Christian perspective.”⁵⁰

Dyson’s and Markus’s studies provide good grounds for rejecting any interpretation of the *City of God* as a denial of the legitimacy of the secular, as a shared space in which Christians can cooperate with others for the common good. Augustine’s polarity of the “heavenly” and “earthly” cities cannot be used to set up a dichotomy between a peaceful Church and an intrinsically sinful secular realm. How, then, can the *City of God* shed light on the contemporary situation of Christians in liberal societies? I want to argue that the great value of the

City of God for understanding our contemporary situation is not in an alleged tale of the contrasts between a peaceful Church and a irredeemably violent liberal state, but in its reflections on human freedom in relation to two loves: the love of God and neighbor, in contrast to the love of self.⁵¹ These two differing loves characterize human beings, and they differentiate the two cities.⁵² I want to illuminate the “two stories” of liberal societies with Augustine’s account of the “two cities”—and the two loves that energize them—as fundamental possibilities of human freedom.

This understanding of the heritage of the *City of God* must, of course, reinterpret Augustine’s understanding of grace and salvation in light of contemporary Christian understandings.⁵³ According to Vatican II, the grace of salvation is not limited to the baptized, but rather it is offered to all humanity. All human beings, whether they know and acknowledge Christ explicitly or respond to the grace of God in conscience through the awareness of ultimate values given in their own cultures, can belong to the *civitas Dei*.⁵⁴ All human beings, gifted with the grace of salvation, can exercise their freedom to the extent of refusing or responding to the love of God. In this sense, the “two cities” can be interpreted as fundamental options of human freedom: the “heavenly city” is the community of those, Christian or otherwise, who respond to the gift of grace with love of God and neighbor; the “earthly city” is comprised of those who are enslaved by self-love.

I began this chapter by reflecting on liberal society as a space in which the potential of human freedom for community and dignity or for selfishness and degradation is constantly in play. In this light, Augustine’s reflections on human freedom in the *City of God* are of extraordinary value, as a key aspect of a seminal Christian text expounding the meaning and consequences of fundamental human choices with dramatic intensity and analytical power. Augustine sets out the meaning of the two loves in a key passage:

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the

Heavenly City glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience. The earthly lifts up its head in its own glory, the Heavenly City says to its God: “My glory, you lift up my head.” (Ps 3, 3) In the former, the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, “I will love you, my Lord, my strength” (Psalm 18,1).⁵⁵

The two loves have their outcomes in different expressions of freedom. The love of God and neighbor seeks its glory not in itself but in God and expresses itself in “the witness of a good conscience,” in a humility and trust that recognizes God’s Lordship, and in community between those who are entrusted with government and those who are governed. The love of self is expressed in contempt for God, by an obsession with its own glory and power, and by the *libido dominandi*, a lust that binds not only the ruled but also the rulers themselves who are captive to it. Citing Romans 1:21, Augustine argues in the same passage that this false love also leads to the self-degradation of idolatry. The degradation of human sexuality through idolatry and its associated obscene practices is pursued in detail by Augustine in relation to pagan Rome in the early books of the *City of God*.⁵⁶ Since all evil is the perversion of something good, this difference between the two cities is not from nature, but rather a perversion of nature.⁵⁷

In the city of God, freedom is characterized by humility, most of all in the example of Christ himself: “Thus, in a surprising way, there is something in humility to exalt the mind, and something in exaltation to abase it. . . . That is why humility is highly prized in the City of God . . . and it receives particular emphasis in the character of Christ, the king of that City.”⁵⁸ Humility “exalts the mind by making it subject to God.”⁵⁹ A freedom that deems itself to be self-sufficient diminishes a human being: “This then is the original evil: man regards himself as his own light, and turns away from that light which would make man

himself a light if he would set his heart on it.”⁶⁰ Freedom should not trust its own will, but should “hope to call upon the name of the Lord God.”⁶¹

Although we are created free, subjection to sin enslaves our freedom, and only openness to the grace of God can restore it.⁶² The exercise of human freedom is not once for all, but rather it is characterized by constant struggle.⁶³ Augustine emphasizes that we cannot achieve the elimination of the desires of the flesh in this life, cannot think we have achieved victory. The virtues, “which are certainly the best and most useful of man’s endowments here below,” are of inestimable assistance in this struggle.⁶⁴ The “membership” of either city is not irrevocable but depends on freedom’s response to the gift of grace.

For Augustine, a society or “people” is a group that is bound together by shared values—by its “common objects of love”—and the character of any society can be discovered from these shared values.⁶⁵ The citizens of the heavenly city are oriented towards community: they resist the spell of the *libido dominandi* and “form a community where there is no love of a will that is personal and, as we may say, private, but a love that rejoices in a good that is at once shared by all and unchanging—a love that makes ‘one heart’ out of many, a love that is the whole-hearted and harmonious obedience of mutual affection.”⁶⁶

The highest value for the life of a community is peace, “than which nothing better can be found.” This is the supreme desire and includes a “mutual fellowship in God.”⁶⁷ Peace is well-ordered concord, characterized by mutual service. In the peaceful household, “even those who give orders are the servants of those whom they appear to command. For they do not give orders because of a lust for domination but from a dutiful concern for the interests of others, not with pride in taking precedence over others, but with compassion in taking care of others.”⁶⁸

In the heavenly city, all good acts are directed towards peace, both “in relation to God, and in relation to a neighbor, since the life of a city is inevitably a social life.”⁶⁹ In the earthly city, by contrast, peace is only the temporary absence of war, the result of conquest that reverts once again to war once the resentment of the vanquished bursts out in revenge:

If any section of that city has risen up in war against another part, it seeks to be victorious over other nations, though it itself is the slave of base passions; and if, when victorious, it is exalted in its arrogance, that victory brings death in its train. Whereas if it consider the human condition and the changes and chances common to mankind, and is more tormented by possible misfortunes than puffed up by its present success, then its victory is only doomed to death. For it will not be able to lord it permanently over those whom it has been able to subdue victoriously.⁷⁰

Augustine's reflections on the different effects of the two loves focus on the contrast between humility and self-aggrandizement. Humble people know that our powers and capacities come from God, and that they will only find fulfillment in worship of God and in love of neighbor. Love of neighbor is expressed in peaceful service, the effort to form a community where some may have higher office, but where no one lives by domination or in servitude. Self-aggrandizement, in contrast, leads to a cycle of violence, domination, and the counterviolence of the defeated, where peace is merely another way of saying that there is no one left to fight. The choices of these two loves, in their different expressions, determine the character of a community, whether large or small. Peaceful communities are bonded by the ties of mutual respect and service; warring communities by the power of the *libido dominandi*, which enslaves both the victors and the vanquished.⁷¹

The continuing power of Augustine's reflections, and their profound relevance to liberal societies, lies in their insight into the radical social and political implications of our loves. These loves are the expression of our freedom; but for Augustine there are loves that intensify and multiply freedom, and others that in fact bind and choke it, spiraling downwards into various forms of destruction, addiction, and self-degradation. As shared values, the character of our loves shapes the kind of society we live in. Augustine is passionate about the potential of communities, especially families and groups of friends, to live a common life of peace and mutual service. Clearly, he did not share the conviction of pre-Christian Graeco-Roman philosophers that the *polis*, the state itself, could be a school of virtue in the higher sense.

Thomas Aquinas was to have a more positive view of the political realm and its capacity for moral education.⁷² However, Augustine did recognize the worth of political and social institutions for the common life of Christian and pagan alike, and he acknowledged the Christian value of virtuous commitment within these institutions.

Augustine's contrast of the two loves intensifies our awareness of the fateful consequences of the abuse of freedom, especially in the context of modernity, in which individual will is so often unconstrained by tradition and has so much technological power at its disposal. At the same time, he constantly reminds us of the power of grace to lead freedom towards peaceful community—that it is possible for human beings to live in mutual respect, consideration, and service.

Augustine's account of freedom, written before the development of Christendom, continues to illuminate the circumstances of liberal societies that have emerged from the demise of Christendom; most of all, it highlights the challenges they face. These challenges are shared by the Christian church, which is committed to helping liberal society tell the better story of freedom, so that the church can live freely within it, but also—and most of all—for the sake of all the human beings that are members of liberal societies, and for the whole world that is so deeply affected by the multifaceted powers of liberal modernity.⁷³ Augustine reminds us that the task of virtue is never completed, that none can ever say that they have mastered their vices. In the same way, liberal societies are constantly faced with the choice between the two loves—the two meanings of freedom—sometimes in more everyday ways, sometimes in ways that may determine the future of civilization. The Christian tradition is profoundly aware of the radical character of human freedom—of its power for good and ill—and Augustine's *City of God* is a classic expression of that awareness. It is this understanding that the Church brings to secularity, the shared space of social debate, in order to serve the common good.

Notes

1. For example, De Valera's Irish Republic and the early twentieth-century French Third Republic at the time of the expulsion of Catholic religious orders were both democratic but hardly liberal.

2. As Charles Taylor argues in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004), “a moral order is more than just a set of norms; it also contains what we might call an ‘ontic’ component, identifying features of the world that make the norms realizable.” In the “modern social imaginary,” this “ontic” order has not disappeared, but is now “a feature about us humans” (10–11). This imaginary is a secular imaginary in the sense that it involves the “freeing of politics from its ontic dependence on religion” (187).
3. This becomes particularly clear when societies are freed from oppression and can embrace freedom once again, as was the case in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism in 1989. During the initial years of democratization in Eastern Europe, freedom as sheer voluntarism was very evident, with the widespread prominence of “carpetbagger” capitalism, pornography, and organized crime; this was followed more slowly and gradually by freedom as a complex articulation of tradition and the development of more stable democratic institutions and community groups.
4. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
5. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 147.
6. *Ibid.*, 151.
7. *Ibid.*, 231.
8. *Ibid.*, 213.
9. *Ibid.*, 236.
10. *Ibid.*, 245.
11. *Ibid.*, 246.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 247.
14. *Ibid.*, 248. O’Donovan draws a strong distinction between the natural law doctrines of early modernity and the doctrines of subjective human rights that were influential in the eighteenth century and afterwards. However, in *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2005), Jean Porter argues, drawing on the work of Brian Tierney (*The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law and Church Law* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]), that we in fact owe “the first explicit claims for the existence of subjective

natural rights to medieval canon lawyers” (344), who, in their development of the idea of natural law from Scripture and other sources, formulated “a concept of the natural law which regards an interior power or capacity for moral discernment as natural law in the primary and paradigmatic sense, in terms of which other kinds of appeals to the natural law are to be understood.” This gave “them a way to justify and safeguard claims to autonomy and self-direction” (348), which led in turn to the “idea of a right as a subjective power of the individual” (350), giving rise to a distinctive claim and existing prior to particular social arrangements. The key scriptural influence on this was the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, which was linked to the capacity for moral discernment that belongs to every human being.

15. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 230.
16. *Ibid.*, 274.
17. *Ibid.*, 251.
18. *Ibid.*, 277–78.
19. *Ibid.*, 284.
20. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
21. For James McEvoy, O'Donovan's judgment is that “citizens of liberal societies today have an implicit distrust of the idea of Christendom and therefore raise the question about coercion because they see society in terms of minimum formal conditions. And they think about society in this way, he continues, because they have lost confidence in the search for shared convictions.” James McEvoy, “A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan about Church and Government,” *The Heythrop Journal* 48 (November 2007): 957. Yet as McEvoy rightly notes, “O'Donovan's argument does not directly respond to the question of whether Christendom is implicitly coercive. That question remains unanswered. Neither does O'Donovan's response here acknowledge that the question about Christendom and coercion could be raised by someone not at all committed to or influenced by the contemporary subjectivist climate” (960). McEvoy argues that Taylor's work recognizes the inevitably coercive effects of Christendom and at the same time offers a thorough critical analysis of contemporary subjectivism.
22. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* 18.
23. *Ibid.*, 23–24.
24. *Ibid.*, 24.
25. *Ibid.*, 16.

26. Ibid., 32.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 33.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 37.
31. Ibid., 35.
32. Ibid.
33. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 249.
34. Recall, for example, the plea of the Prague Spring of 1968 for “socialism with a human face.”
35. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) begins with the words, “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all the members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Diane Ravitch and Abigail Thernstrom, eds., *The Democracy Reader* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 202. Article I of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany affirms that “The dignity of the human person is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the duty of all state authority. 2. Therefore the German people affirms the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person as the foundation of all human community, peace and justice in the world” (author's translation). See www.datenschutz-berlin.de/recht/de/gg/ggI_de.htm#artI. Cf. the discussion of this article in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, Vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1991), where the sources of contemporary conceptions of human rights in a theological vision of the human person are emphasized (205). For the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, human beings are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” See Vincent Wilson Jr., ed., *The Book of Great American Documents* (Brookeville, MD: American History Research Associates, 1987), 15.
36. See, for example, William Cavanaugh, “Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 196–208 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). For Cavanaugh, “Rather than forcing a choice between acceptance of or withdrawal from the one public reality, Augustine's metaphor of the two cities is a far more fruitful model, for it helps us to see that there are two rival performances, the City of God and the earthly city, contending for the status of ‘public.’” In Cavanaugh's discussion these two “rival performances” are identified with the difference between the church and the

- modern “nation-state,” and Augustine’s analysis of the *libido dominandi* in the Roman empire “carries over—*mutatis mutandis*—to the tragic politics of the liberal state” (206).
37. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1984) XV:1, 595. All subsequent references are to this edition.
 38. R. W. Dyson, *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2001), 10–11. See also Dyson’s *St. Augustine of Hippo: The Christian Transformation of Political Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005) 32–33.
 39. According to Dyson’s reading of Augustine, “the state has arisen . . . first as a consequence and expression of sin; second, as a mechanism for ameliorating the material damage arising from sin; and third, as an instrument of discipline, whereby sinful men are punished and virtuous men tested and proved” (*The Pilgrim City*, 47).
 40. Robert Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).
 41. *Ibid.*, 39. Cf. *City of God* I:35.
 42. *Ibid.*, 41.
 43. *Ibid.*, 43.
 44. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 406.
 45. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 44. Markus’s formulation of Milbank’s reading of Augustine is cited from M. J. Hollerich, “John Milbank, Augustine and the ‘Secular,’” in *History, Apocalypse and the Secular Imagination*, ed. Mark Vessey, Karla Pollmann, and Allan D. Fitzgerald, 315 (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999).
 46. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 44. Markus notes that in his earlier work, *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine had acknowledged the value of classical culture for Christians; in a similar way, the *City of God* acknowledges the value of “acting within the framework of existing social and political institutions”: “As with the curriculum of the established education system, and, generally, with established practices, customs, and institutions, members of the two Cities make use of the same finite goods, although for different ends, with a ‘different faith, a different hope, a different love’” (XVIII:54, 45). In *Living in Two Cities: Augustinian Trajectories in Political Thought* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1998), Eugene Te Selle argues that “it is true that Augustine detached himself from ‘sacral politics’. But this does not mean that he posited anything as neat as a ‘neutral’ sphere; his thought is more dialectical than

that. He saw the two cities intertwined throughout human history. We are all born children of Cain and the earthly city; but the very fact that we can be reborn into the city of God highlights the potentialities for good that remain in all human reality.” Although rejecting the notion of a “neutral” earthly city, Te Selle does, however, affirm its “ambivalence” in a way that also allows for its legitimacy as a site of moral action for Christians: “it is precisely the earthly city then, not some *tertium quid*, that is affirmed because of its positive achievements and its potentialities for future good. It remains ambivalent, usable by both cities, both sets of motivations” (42–43).

47. *Ibid.*, 46.

48. Augustine, *City of God* V:26. Rowan Williams, in “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the City of God,” *Milltown Studies* 19/20 (1987): 55–72, notes that Augustine praised Theodosius because he was not subject to the *libido dominandi*; he was capable of sharing power and accepting humiliation (65). For Williams, Augustine emphasizes “consulere,” spiritual nurturing, within the context of both small and large communities, which are “essentially purposive, existing so as to nurture a particular kind of human life” (63). So “the member of the City of God is committed *ex professo* to exercising power when called upon to do so, and, in responding to such a call, does not move from a ‘church’ to a ‘state’ sphere of activity, but continues in a practice of nurturing souls already learned in more limited settings” (68). For Gerard O’Daly, in *Augustine’s City of God: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), the *City of God* is “not a discussion of the relations between church and state: rather, it gives an account of how Christians may, and why they must, be good citizens of the empire, by defining the limited but significant area where the aims and interests of the two cities, in their historical form, coincide” (209).

49. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 47. It is noteworthy that *Gaudium et spes* uses the term “earthly city” in its “secular” rather than “reprobate” sense; e.g., “the Church has a saving and an eschatological purpose which can be fully attained only in the future world. But she is already present in this world, and is composed of men, that is, of members of the earthly city [*civitas terrestris*] who have a call to form the family of God’s children during the present history of the human race, and to keep increasing it until the Lord returns” (40); “Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city [*civitas ter-*

rena]; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment” (43). As these extracts demonstrate, in *Gaudium et spes*, members of the Church are also members of the “earthly city,” which itself can bear the impress of divine law. English translation from Vatican Website edition: www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

50. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 45. As Christopher Insole argues in *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press, 2004), the weakness of the “radical orthodox” approach is in its “genealogical reduction” of secular society to an “ontology of violence”: it opens up an “assertive transcendental space” by an erroneous and unnecessarily alarmist description of the secular world, whereas we are in fact left with a “broken middle,” neither nihilism nor the City of God, in which “the wheat and the chaff are thoroughly mixed until the coming of the Son of Man” (141).
51. Robert Kraynak, in *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), understands Augustine’s “earthly city” essentially as the state, rather than as a moral allegory of self-love. However, in contrast to Milbank and Cavanaugh, Kraynak does not interpret Augustine as condemning the “earthly City” in this sense (as secular order) and rightly notes that Augustine’s “political teaching is thus a kind of moderate authoritarianism that respects the limited boundaries of the earthly city” (94). However, Kraynak builds on this to develop an Augustinian theory of contemporary politics and a critique of the “Kantian Christianity” of democracy based on human rights (152–54), arguing that the contemporary import of Augustine’s work is that it “gives sanction to all constitutionally limited governments under God, even those that are not based on human rights or social contract theory” (191). Yet the *City of God* is not principally interesting because it can be interpreted to justify constitutionally limited government in ways that are critical of democratic human rights theory—such an approach is both utopian (because it does not recognize why such undemocratic constitutional governments are intrinsically unstable) and runs counter to Catholic social teaching, as expressed, for example, in Joseph Ratzinger’s somewhat Kantian formulation: “Since all collaborate in the genesis of law, it is common to all. As such, all can and must respect it. And as a matter of fact, democracy’s guarantee that all can work together to shape the law and the just distribution of power is the fundamental reason why democracy is the most appropriate of all

political models.” *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Ignatius Press, 2006), 33. For my own argument, the contemporary importance and relevance of the *City of God* is less in transposing Augustine’s sense of the limitations of government (which, as TeSelle notes, was “overwhelmed with the fleeting character of life and the lack of opportunities to make much of a difference”; *Living in Two Cities*, 156) to our own very different age than in its analysis of the two loves and their fateful importance for moral and political choices.

52. It is significant that one of Catholic tradition’s most influential spiritual texts, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, was probably influenced by Augustine’s reflections on the two loves as fundamental options of human freedom, which were expressed by Ignatius in “A Meditation on Two Standards”: the “standard of Christ” and the “standard of Satan” (Fourth Day, Second Week. *The Spiritual Exercises*, ed. L. Puhl SJ, 60 [Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951]). In *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1953), Hugo Rahner argues that this fundamental theme of the *City of God* influenced Ignatius through his reading of the story of Augustine in the *Golden Legend* during his convalescence after the siege of Pamplona (27–28). The *Golden Legend* relates of Augustine’s great work, “that his book is concerned with the story of two cities, with the Kings of these two cities, Jerusalem and Babylon. For Christ is king over Jerusalem, Satan over Babylon. Two contrary loves gave birth to these cities.” Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. W. G. Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), II:126.
53. In the history of salvation before Christ, the “City of God” could also include non-Jews who were pleasing to God, such as Job, of whom Augustine writes: “I have no doubt that it was the design of God’s providence that from this one instance we should know that there could also be those among other nations who lived by God’s standards and were pleasing to God, as belonging to the spiritual Jerusalem” (XVIII:47; 829) or even the Erythraean Sybil, because of her prophecies of Christ (XVIII:23). After the coming of Christ, of course, Augustine believed that membership of the eternal City could only be possible through baptism and incorporation into the visible Church. However, even this may need to be nuanced; as T. Johannes van Bavel OSA argues in “What Kind of Church Do You Want? The Breadth of Augustine’s Ecclesiology” (*Louvain Studies* 7/3 (Spring 1979): 147–71), although Augustine adopted Cyprian’s view that “outside the Church there is no salvation,” “we must,

however, be on our guard against a too simplistic interpretation of this principle,” since, in Augustine’s conception, “church” “generally means more than the empirical church” (153), and this has implications for his conception of the breadth of the church both before and even after the coming of Christ (154–55).

54. “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—these too may achieve eternal salvation.” *Lumen gentium*, 16. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing, 1987), 367.
55. XIV:28, 593.
56. E.g., VII:26, 27.
57. XII:1, 3.
58. XIV:13, 572–73.
59. XIV:13, 572.
60. XIV:13, 573.
61. XV:21, 635.
62. “The choice of the will, then, is genuinely free only when it is not subservient to faults and sins. God gave it that true freedom, and now that it has been lost, through its own fault, it can be restored only by him who had the power to give it at the beginning. Hence the Truth says ‘if the Son sets you free, then you will be truly free’” (John 8.36) XIV:11, 569.
63. XIX:4, 853–54.
64. XIX:4, 857.
65. XIX:24.
66. XV:3, 599.
67. XIX:13, 870.
68. XIX:14, 874.
69. XIX:17, 879.
70. XV:4, 599.
71. As Raymond Canning notes in his article “Common Good,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), for Augustine, pride is “the enemy of the common good,” and is “paralleled by a ruinous self-love which, in turning from the pursuit of the common good to its own exclusive good—whether that be money or power—finds itself not in a state of possessing more but in confinement and destitution (*in angustias egestatemque*)” (220).

72. For Paul E. Sigmund, in “Law and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (Cambridge University Press, 1993), in the *De regimine principum*, Aquinas conceives of the political community as “a union of free men under the direction of a ruler who aims at the promotion of the common good. Government then has positive role and justification” (218). In contrast to Augustine, Aquinas believed that the state is part of God’s original intention for creation, rather than the result of the fall: for Aquinas, whereas “servitude” is the result of sin, “subjection” “could have existed before sin” in a hierarchy oriented to the common good. See Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe 1250–1450* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23. For Robert Markus, the trajectory of Augustine’s thought is not simply towards a “night watchman” state: he would have wanted to maximize social and cultural consensus, and thus to extend the public realm accordingly; yet he would not have welcomed the idea of a shared religion being a purpose of the state, in the sense of a “Christendom,” since this would threaten the eschatological character of the City of God (*Christianity and the Secular*, 64–65).
73. “In pursuing its own salvific purpose not only does the Church communicate divine life to men but in a certain sense it casts the reflected light of that divine life over all the earth, notably in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way it consolidates society, and endows the daily activity of men with a deeper sense and meaning. The Church, then, believes it can contribute much to humanizing the family of man and its history through each of its members and its community as a whole.” Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 40. Flannery, 940.