Comment on Holloway

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Dr. Holloway invites us, as American citizens, to examine our own regime in the light of Catholic teaching. He asks us to begin the inquiry with a comparison of Rerum Novarum with the Tenth Federalist because both are foundational for their respective traditions; and he concludes that the two are “starkly incompatible.”

Much of Dr. Holloway’s criticism of Madison rests on this passage: “As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection exists between his reason and his selflove, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves.” I see nothing in these sentences to criticize. The reason of man is fallible. I know of no one who asserts that the reason of man is infallible. Certainly, the Christian faith recognizes the fallibility of man’s reason. It is also true that men form different opinions. Part of the argument for the authority of the Church rests on the fact that men, even men of good faith, form different opinions. It is also true that a man’s opinions and passions have a reciprocal influence on each other, and that a man’s passions attach themselves to his opinions. Again, I am not aware of anyone who denies these facts. If, as I think, Madison’s statement here rests on truths that no one denies, I do not see how this statement can fairly be criticized.

It is certainly not true that Madison gives “an account of human nature in which the distinctively human, reason, is subordinated and all but disappears” or that Madison views man as “just a clever animal.” In Federalist 57, Madison says, “The aim of every political Constitution is or ought to be first to obtain for rulers, men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue the common good of the society . . .” The first effect of republican government, according to Federalist 10, is “to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” Here, and elsewhere, Madison states that the aim of a wellformed government is to secure rulers who have wisdom and virtue and who will pursue justice and
the common good. Madison’s view of the aim of a wellformed government is inconsistent with the notion that Madison sees men as nothing more than clever animals who can know nothing but what pertains to their bodily desires and longing for economic wellbeing. Hobbes may have held the views that Dr. Holloway criticizes; but Madison is not Hobbes, and Madison did not hold these views.

Since Dr. Holloway intends his piece as a reflection, not just on the views of James Madison but on the principles of the American founding, we should recall in this context that the signers of the Declaration of Independence appealed to Almighty God for the rectitude of their intentions and pledged to one another their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. These were not men who regarded themselves and others as nothing more than clever animals. They were not men for whom economic well-being was the highest good, nor were they men who viewed violent death as the greatest evil—all of which is to say that the men who signed the Declaration were not Hobbesians. In a real sense, not just in words, they pledged their lives, their material possessions, and their “sacred honor” for the sake of the transcendent principle that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights. That they did so cannot be explained on Dr. Holloway’s thesis that the founding father was not George Washington but Thomas Hobbes.

Dr. Holloway also criticizes Madison for saying “we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control.” Again, that statement is obviously true, and no one, to my knowledge, denies it. Every polity has policemen precisely because everyone recognizes that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied upon as an adequate control for vice.

It is illogical to argue that because Madison says religion cannot be relied upon as an adequate control, he must think it is useless. If I say that an apple a day is inadequate to keep the doctor away, that doesn’t mean I think it is useless. If I say that the possibility of imprisonment is inadequate to control criminal behavior, that doesn’t mean I think it is useless. It is plain—to take an example directly from Madison—that Madison did not think that extending the size of the republic, alone, would be adequate to control faction. He says in the first sentence of Federalist 10 that a well constructed union will have a “tendency” to control faction; and he says in the penultimate paragraph that faction is “less apt” to pervade the union than an individual and “more likely” to taint a district than a state. If Madison thought the extended republic, alone, would suffice to control faction, he need not have advocated the systems of checks and balances in the division of the power of government into three branches. Even though Madison realized that extending the size of the republic would be inadequate to control faction, he obviously did not think it was useless; and, so, the fact that Madison says that religion is inadequate to control faction does not mean he thinks religion is useless.
It is also true that religion can be and has been a source of faction. We know that Catholics were persecuted in the colonies outside of Maryland, and the religious wars in Europe were fresh in the minds of the founders of our country. It has been my observation that factions exist within the Catholic Church. I am told by friends who teach at Catholic universities that the faculty members in those institutions sometimes are divided into factions. I see nothing false in what Madison says.

Nor do I see any inconsistency in saying that religion cannot be relied upon to as an adequate control for faction, and in saying that religion is sometimes a source of faction If religion is sometimes a source of faction, obviously it cannot be relied upon to control faction. Religion may be strong enough in the soul of one man to induce him to place the interests of others above his own interests but not strong enough in the soul of the next man. Religion may be strong enough in one time or one place to control faction but not that strong in another time or place. Religion may in some time or place be the source of such fanaticism as to induce men to murder without it always inducing men to such fanaticism. The Madisonian analysis recognizes that the influence of religion can and does vary. Dr. Holloway takes this recognition to reflect poorly on Madison, but Madison would have been a poor historian and a poor observer of human nature had he not noticed it.

Pope Leo never says that the only thing needed to control class conflict is to teach the classes their respective duties toward one another. What he does say is: “Were these percepts carefully obeyed and followed out, would they not be sufficient to themselves to keep under all strife and its causes?” (Para. 20) “But, if Christian precepts prevail, the respective classes will not only be united in the bonds of friendship, but also in those of brotherly love.” (Para. 25) “Would it not seem that, were society penetrated with ideas like these, strife must quickly cease?” (Para. 25) All of these statements are in the subjunctive, not the indicative. They state what would happen if everyone followed Christian precepts; they do not say that the only thing needed is to teach those precepts. In paragraph 32 Leo says, “The foremost duty, therefore, of the rulers of the State should be to make sure that the laws and institutions, the general character and administration of the commonwealth, shall be such as of themselves to realize public wellbeing and private prosperity.” Wellformed laws and institutions are important to Pope Leo. It is inaccurate to say, “Leo . . . says nothing about government structures as a way of solving the conflict . . . .” See Centesimus Annus, para. 44.

As helpful as the ancient/modern dichotomy may be in commenting on political philosophy, I do not think it provides the key to understanding the founding. The Declaration, for example, can be understood on its own terms, but it cannot be reduced to Locke, Hobbes, Machiavelli, or any other particular
political philosopher. In our day, it is the Christians who appeal to the
*Declaration*, at which the heirs of Hobbes scoff. The Federalist Papers were
written to persuade the public at large, the members of which were largely
Christians; and it appealed to premises that the readers would accept. We can
go farther and say that the Federalist Papers appealed to premises the readers
would accept because the Constitution was based on principles the public would
accept. I do not that say the founding was specifically Christian, but I do say it
cannot be understood if the Christian element is ignored, which it must be if
the ancient/modern dichotomy is the guiding heuristic device. And we know
the founders had read the ancients. Jefferson wrote that the *Declaration* was
based on the harmonizing sentiments of the day; and he mentions Aristotle and
Cicero, as well as Locke and Sydney (but not Hobbes) as sources of those
harmonizing sentiments. The founding cannot be reduced to nothing more
than the implementation of the political philosophy of Hobbes or any other
specific philosopher.

By the same token, it is true that the American regime and the
principles of Catholic social thought are not identical. In what regime are the
founding principles and the principles of Catholic social thought identical? The
issue is nature and extent of the differences, not whether differences exist. If the
principles of the American regime and the principles of Catholic social thought
are “starkly incompatible”, as Dr. Holloway argues, those from the secular left
who argue that Catholics cannot be good citizens of this country are correct.
Dr. Holloway seems to join hands with those who say that Catholics should be
excluded from the public square. Opposites meet. But, the argument that
America was founded on materialistic, atheistic, hedonistic principles that are
“starkly incompatible” with Christianity is simply wrong whether that
argument is made by those whose own views are materialistic, atheistic and
hedonistic, or whether it is made by someone, like our friend Dr. Holloway, who
loathes materialism, atheism, and hedonism.

Which brings us to Dr. Holloway. It is still true today, by any empirical
measure, that the American people are more religious than their European
counterparts, and that Catholicism is more successful in America than in
Western Europe. While churches are empty in Europe, they are full in America.
Americans attend church in far greater numbers than Europeans, pray in greater
numbers, give far more money to charities, send more Christian missionaries
around the world, and make religious faith a greater part of life as a whole. We
share with Western Europe the same civilization, the same cultural heritage;
and we are subject to the same historical trends. Throughout western
civilization the historical trend for the past few centuries has been toward
secularism and moral relativism, in America as well as Europe. But America
also is distinct from Western Europe. Part of that distinctiveness is its
comparatively greater religious faith. If the principles of the American founding were so fundamentally flawed—so low, so hedonistic, materialistic and implicitly atheistic as Dr. Holloway claims, how do we account for the fact that from Tocqueville’s time through today, faith—including the Catholic faith—has had greater success in America than elsewhere in the West? Using Pope Leo’s standards as stated in *Rerum Novarum*, what regime has been more successful than the United States?

We are not the people we should be, and I do not intend to say that we are; but, is that the fault of the founders, or is it the fault of succeeding generations? We have abandoned the principle stated in the *Declaration of Independence* that all men are created with certain inalienable rights, among which is the right to life. Is our abandonment of this founding principle the fault of the founders? What should the founders have done differently? Could they have done something to immunize America from the historical trends that shape western civilization as a whole? Is Dr. Holloway contending that the founders should have broken the country into small republics, which was the issue addressed in the Tenth Federalist? Is he saying the founders should have adopted Catholicism as the established national religion? If not, then what is the criticism?