TRANSCENDENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM: MODERNITY AND THE RIGHT TO TRUTH

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By reviewing the notion of the human person found in the modern liberal tradition, this essay seeks to give an account of the possible tensions between modern liberal political life and human fulfillment as understood in Catholic tradition. Resolving any such tensions would require showing that the philosophical underpinnings of modern liberalism are compatible with man’s “transcendent dignity” to pursue and live the Truth. By way of conclusion, the Church’s rapprochement with modern liberalism is discussed in light of Benedict XVI’s comments on and praise of American civil life made during his recent visit to the U.S.

While recent years have witnessed increasing criticism of the extent to which modern liberalism as a social and political project has lived up to its aspirations to secure personal freedom, the modern impetus to use human, civil, or natural rights as a bulwark against the encroachment of the state remains a dominant feature of contemporary discourse. Despite the criticism, then, that aspect of the modern political tradition that grounds the emergence of civil community in an account of those rights that the state exists to protect remains strong. In light of modernity’s emphasis on rights, as well as the contemporary “rights talk” that dictates social and political policy, the question of the extent to which modern liberalism is amenable to an understanding of the human good in terms of such transcendent aims as Truth or God must be answered by analyzing the nature of these rights and the concept of the human person presupposed by such discourse. By reviewing the notion of the human person found in the modern liberal tradition, this essay seeks to give an account of the possible tensions between modern liberal political life and human fulfillment as understood in Catholic tradition.1 Elsewhere, I have argued both against the position that modern liberalism rests on an Augustinian foundation and for a possible development of “Augustinian liberalism”; in this article I develop these claims by attempting to trace the historical relationship between medieval Catholic political thought and the rise of modern liberalism.2 I conclude by discussing the Church’s rapprochement with modern liberalism in light of Benedict XVI’s comments on— and praise of— American civil life made during his recent visit to the United States.
Resolving any tensions between Catholicism and modern liberalism would require showing that John Paul II’s claim that man has a “transcendent dignity” that finds its expression as a basis for political freedom in “the natural and fundamental right to know the truth and live according to that truth” can be reconciled with the philosophical underpinnings of modern liberalism. *Dignitatis Humanae*, for example, the document often taken to be a watershed in the Church’s openness to modern political developments, makes clear that the Church has always insisted that rights are the means by which governments can respect human dignity or the nature of man as a free and rational being in pursuit of God as the *telos* toward which he is directed. John Paul II built many of his political writings on this document’s understanding of the right to religious freedom as the means by which the dignity of man as one called to know, love, and serve God could be actualized in a fallen world. The Church, then, can acknowledge the necessity of religious freedom because of man’s duty to pursue the Truth. The *right to transcendent Truth* (as I am calling it) is fundamental, because it is an acknowledgement that the sphere of freedom so cherished in modern political life is made possible by God’s love for man and desire that all might be saved. What is at stake in assessing the compatibility of Catholicism and modern liberalism is determining whether or not this right to transcendent Truth can be found within the modern liberal tradition.

1. The Medieval Roots of Modern Liberalism

Before addressing the philosophical anthropology of modern liberalism, it is worth considering the emergence of modern liberalism out of late medieval and renaissance political thought. Putting liberalism in historical context helps us to see that many of the features that we associate with this tradition are an outgrowth of a more obviously Christian form of political theory. While there is no doubt that modern liberalism transforms some of these features—and we must be attentive to this if we are to appreciate its orientation—after reviewing them we will be in a better position to assess any possible rapprochement between the Church and modern liberalism. In what follows, I work through some of the key features of modern liberalism, their sources in late medieval thought, and the distinctive perspectives on them adopted by liberal theorists. Inevitably, some forms of modern liberalism will not fit all of these features; yet, the following casts a wide enough net to capture most of its forms.
Before looking at particular features of modern liberalism, it would be helpful to discuss briefly my use of the term modern liberalism. Space restraints prevent a thorough discussion of the term, but, as will become apparent below, I use the term in a very broad sense to indicate a tradition of political theory that arose in the seventeenth century with Hobbes; that has dominated both the practice and theory of politics subsequently; and that finds its most recent and influential form in the work of John Rawls and his disciples. While this wide definition does still leave us with thorny questions as to who counts as a modern liberal, the list of key features covered below is intended to provide criteria that one could use in assessing how closely a particular figure works within the modern liberal tradition. Further, since the emphasis of the article is tracing the origins of modern liberalism out of the insights and practices gleaned from the medieval world, the concern here is more with the source of modern liberal ideas than with their unfolding. This approach will prove helpful in thinking through the perceived change in official Catholic teaching on modern liberalism: Though the general perception is that the Church viewed modern liberalism as a heresy in the nineteenth century and then did an about-face at the Second Vatican Council, the historical approach taken here allows me to address both the extent to which modern liberalism is indebted to Christian political thought and the problematic anthropology that the former tends to presuppose. Thus, the Church has consistently rejected the flawed notions of freedom, autonomy, and human fulfillment (or lack thereof) espoused by the modern liberal tradition, even if She has in recent times emphasized points of agreement concerning such matters as rights or the role of the state and its relation to the Church. This article takes such theorists as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls to be emblematic and central thinkers in the modern liberal tradition, though arguing for or against the inclusion of particular thinkers in the canon is beyond the scope of the current work.

The first key feature of modern liberalism is its focus on peace, security, and liberty as the legitimate aims of government. A subtle shift is made from the notion of a common good to that of a common welfare; this terminological shift can be characterized as a transition from the ancient focus on virtue to the modern concern with liberty. The modern liberal demand for limited government is connected with this changed conception of the aim of government, and yet this shift predates liberalism.

As Quentin Skinner ably shows in The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, liberty was the rallying cry of the Italian city-states at least as far back as the twelfth century. Late medieval thinkers tended
to emphasize liberty as much as virtue, seeing the secular government as primarily concerned with worldly goods, and the Church as responsible for the goods of the soul. Thus, Christianity arguably demands limited government to the extent to which it sees virtue in its fullest sense as a concern for the Body of Christ rather than the body politic. As John Courtney Murray points out, freedom has ever been the goal of the Church, and She provided that first means by which to limit the state. As Brian Tierney and Harold J. Berman point out, moreover, the distinction between secular and ecclesiastical authority that is unique to Christendom “enhance[d] the possibilities for a growth of human freedom . . . .”

A second key feature of modern liberalism is the church/state distinction. In his classic study of the history of early modern political theory, *Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625*, John Neville Figgis claims that it would be anachronistic to speak of church and state as separate entities, for the medieval mind conceived of the whole of Christendom as being one body, with the Church as its soul and the state as its body. While it would be difficult to deny the general claim that pre-modern political theory tended to view church and state as one entity with different branches of jurisdiction, it would be remiss to overlook the fact that it is Christianity that is responsible for distinguishing between religious and secular obligations, for demanding of the faithful that they render obedience to two different authorities, and, when necessary, to obey God rather than man. Even the most Caesaropapist Catholic authors such as Bellarmine recognized a distinction between ecclesiastical and secular authority.

Interestingly enough, we must turn to early modern political theory to find a strong identity between church and state. Thomas Hobbes grants to the sovereign all power over both church and state in order to ensure that peace and security, two of the hallmarks of modern liberal regimes, will be preserved. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while disagreeing with Hobbes over the solution to the ‘problem’ that Christianity poses to civil order, nonetheless agrees that separating church and state damaged the fabric of civic life.

While there is evidently a strain of modern liberalism that is overtly hostile to Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, the more subtle form of liberalism dominant today tends to view religion as a private affair not standing in need of regulation. On this account, religion may even be seen as playing a positive role in maintaining a healthy political community; still, faith is seen as a matter of private concern best left out of politics. In its earliest form, we could think of John Locke’s view that citizens who do not believe in God pose a threat
to political order inasmuch as they cannot be counted on to keep promises, contracts, and the like. Yet, Locke viewed Catholicism as a threat, singling it out as one religion that could not be tolerated.

It may be that the anti-Catholicism of so many modern liberals is revelatory of a disagreement over the nature of the church/state distinction. More pointedly, the claim that Catholicism is to be banned from the state because of its demand for independent ecclesiastical authority over the members of the Body of Christ scattered throughout the world seems to be emblematic of modern liberal thought. The contemporary discourse on this topic reveals that the vestiges of anti-Catholicism have not been purged from liberalism. Thus, distinguishing between the roles of church and state is not inherently problematic: Christianity itself created and demands this distinction; modern liberalism borrowed it and ultimately distorted it.

A third key feature of modern liberalism is the doctrine of sovereignty, which is similarly of pre-modern origin. While this doctrine tends to be seen as originating with Jean Bodin in the late sixteenth century, Bodin saw himself as part of a tradition that extended back to Aristotle. Further, in some sense, the pope could be seen as the sovereign of Medieval Christendom, and the rise of independent, sovereign states dates back at least to the mid-fifteenth century. Yet, even in the late medieval and Renaissance periods, this doctrine of sovereignty was problematic, for it was associated with Gallicanism, conciliarism, and, more generally, the elevation of the political body over the religious.

The view that political society must be bound together by allegiance to an indivisible power helps to explain why Catholicism poses a problem for modern liberal theory. First and foremost, the Catholic position that Christians have a dual allegiance stands in the way of a system of thought that demands of the citizenry an inviolable allegiance to a monolithic government agency. The reason why Locke must exclude Catholics from the state is that they serve a foreign prince, for the pope’s authority necessarily limits that of the sovereign. Thus, it should be of no surprise that Catholic authors tend to find the doctrine of sovereignty deeply troubling. Even in the case of Johannes Althusius, who emphasizes intermediary institutions and the importance of both natural and divine law as natural limitations on the power of the sovereign, the Church is nationalized and the ‘soul’ is seen not as the Church but as the law.

Closely associated with the doctrine of sovereignty is that of the social contract, for the establishment of sovereignty is usually seen as the result of a prior contract that appoints a supreme ruler over
individuals. However, not only did the doctrines of sovereignty and social contract develop independently, but the social contract was emphasized in the medieval period as a means of limiting the power of the political leader. By the end of the sixteenth century, both French Protestants and Spanish Jesuits were focusing on a social contract to combat the absolutist claims of monarchs. For example, Juan de Mariana’s understanding of the social compact necessitates the state’s reservation of the right to overthrow a ruler who violates fundamental laws. A social contract guarantees that both ruler and ruled follow their assigned rules and does not necessarily grant to the sovereign the role of final court of appeals when disagreements arise concerning the justice of policies or laws. If anything, the social contract tradition seems to work in the opposite direction of the notion of sovereignty, inasmuch as it limits the authority of the ruler.

It is only with Hobbes (and to some extent Bodin) that these two traditions of sovereignty and social contract are definitively fused together, for Hobbes asserts that the sovereign alone can assess the terms of the contract and, further, as a judge not himself bound by the contract, cannot violate it. Even with Locke, who grants a space to legitimate revolution, the reason governments can be overthrown is that the (majority of) the people retain their sovereignty and thus their right to assess the terms of the social contract. The sovereign people play the very same role in Locke as the sovereign ruler does in Hobbes: In both cases the social contract does not limit the authority of the sovereign. Bertrand de Jouvenel rightly points out that, whereas the doctrines of sovereignty and social contract theory were traditionally used as means by which absolutism could be thwarted, modern thinkers removed this check when they replaced God’s authorship of power with the will of the people.

While the notion of rights is of ancient origin, one of the key features of modern liberalism is the elevated status it gives to them. Concomitant with its view that the aim of government is to provide peace, security, and liberty, is the demand that governments respect the rights of their citizens, be these rights natural, human, civic, or otherwise. Whereas ancient and medieval thinkers concerned themselves with the duty of citizens, as well as of rulers, to live in accordance with nature, modern thinkers tend to focus on the rights of individuals to pursue their life goals in accordance with their own private concepts of the good. Again, there is no need to append to this modern view the relativism that we tend to associate with those who claim that freedom is self-creation.
The concern with rights that is characteristic of modern liberalism can be seen as an outgrowth of the medieval distinction between church and state: Since the aim of the state is restricted to earthly goods, and since the freedom of the Church must be preserved, it is necessary to formulate a doctrine of rights robust enough to protect the spiritual lives of the citizens. In this view, rights must be emphasized precisely so that duties may be performed, for governments are wont to deny to citizens the freedom to fulfill their religious obligations. The modern liberal, while not necessarily concerned with the duties that give meaning to rights, nonetheless is engaged in a project that attempts to preserve a domain of liberty for activities concerning which the state is not competent to judge.28

Finally, this concern for rights is a reflection of the distinction between society and government. Modern liberalism is noted for its abstract and impersonal conception of government, for the separation of government from the private realm of spontaneous social organization. Far from being a modern invention, this distinction is a result of the Two Cities approach of Christian thought. As Murray expresses it, Christianity destroyed the “classical view of society as a single homogenous culture.”29 Christians have always seen themselves as being bound together irrespective of political allegiances, for the Church is one body united together the world over. Thus, Christian society operates independently from, and yet in harmony with, secular governments.30 While the modern liberal speaks in this tradition, a challenge to liberalism has been how simultaneously to respect such societies and the rights of individuals. If anything, liberalism is uncomfortable with the distinction between society and government, for its strong conception of sovereignty demands removing any intermediaries between government and the individuals who constitute the state.

2. The Modern Individual as the Citizen of the Liberal State

Rather than address the conflicts between Catholicism and modern liberalism that came to the fore in considering the key features of liberal theory, it is more fundamental to look into the philosophical anthropology that provides a foundation for liberalism. Such an approach will reveal how the shift from late medieval and renaissance political theory to modern liberal theory took place. While a full defense of this claim must be postponed until another time, I hope to establish that the modern concept of the human person leads to much of what is problematic with modern liberalism. Thus, it is not so much the understanding of how the state is to be organized and the ends it ought
to pursue that is problematic, but the notion of the individual that the state exists to protect and nourish.  

Recent commentators have done much to elucidate the nature of the individual who undergirds the modern liberal project. Michael Sandel’s term, “unencumbered self,” nicely captures the abstractly-constructed and artificial subject to whom the modern liberal gives rights. Communitarians such as Sandel, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Joseph A. Komonchak, and David Hollenbach have ably shown the limitations of the liberal self and any notion of freedom to which such an individual is supposedly entitled. The criticism of the modern liberal individual that I will make can be seen as a complement to their criticisms that has the virtue of showing how radically the liberal self cuts against the concept of rights put forth by recent Church teaching. In particular, the right to transcendent Truth is precisely what modern liberalism calls into question. The validity of this claim can be seen when one looks into the philosophical anthropology of the first modern political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes.

Despite disagreements over whether or not Hobbes is a ‘liberal,’ it would be hard to disagree with John Rawls’ assessment that Hobbes stands at the head of the modern social contract tradition. Yet, since the social contract tradition predates modernity, what qualifies Hobbes as the founder of the modern tradition? Hobbes himself answers this question by claiming that he was the founder of what he called “civil philosophy.” Hobbes’s most developed work in epistemology, metaphysics, and what we would today call philosophy of science, *De Corpore*, begins with a description of the state of the sciences. Hobbes waxes poetic about the explosion of knowledge in the natural sciences and the new age that has dawned only within his own time. Whereas the ancients and medievals contributed little or nothing beyond the rudimentary mathematics and astronomy discovered by the “the Gymnosophists of India, the Magi of Persia, and the Priests of Chaldaea and Egypt,” Galileo, Harvey, and the like have brought innumerable benefits to civilization in just one generation. As much as the natural sciences have advanced in Hobbes’s lifetime, however, the human sciences still wallow in the darkness of opinion and ignorance. Until the laws of peace (i.e., political science/philosophy) have been discovered, the natural sciences remain insecure; the rapid advancements in technology can all be lost unless the social state can be preserved. Hobbes sees himself as doing for political philosophy what others have done for the natural sciences, and this requires building the state on the foundation of scientific methodology.
Hobbes was certainly not the first to attempt to explain how humans could emerge out of a state of nature into the civil state, but his attempt to ground this account in a study of the evolution of man from the level of the brute is original. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* outlines the stages of human development through which man must work if he is to be capable of entering into contracts. Roughly, humans begin as creatures of sense, then develop memories, create mental markers to facilitate the understanding of causality (i.e., language), and finally are able to reason individually and with one another. At this stage they are capable of calculating future possibilities and reckoning advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions. Once they become aware of the innumerable benefits of peace in procuring their individual, respective self-interests, they devise means for contracting with one another and appointing over themselves a sovereign to regulate and govern their affairs. Thus, the state is born.

What should interest us in this account is twofold: 1) the civil state is not a result of a social desire, but of a selfish one; and 2) the driving force behind the development of reason itself is calculation of self-interest rather than the discovery of Truth.

Concerning the first point, a brief study of the social contract tradition as it existed immediately prior to Hobbes reveals a more robust sense of the needs of human nature. Luis Molina argues that humans in a state of nature would want to constitute over themselves a ruler to ensure peace as well as common welfare; in addition, however, they would desire to select another person to aid them in worshipping God. While Juan de Mariana sees human frailty as the cause of the social contract, in addition he claims that God brought humans together so that they could rely on one another’s “mutual affection and friendship.”

Even Hugo Grotius, who is often associated with Hobbes, claims that humans are social by nature and are guided by their natural moral reasonings when forming societies.

As to the second point, one of the distinctive features of early modern philosophy is the self-conscious desire to produce something new, to replace the “useless” philosophizing of all previous philosophy (especially that of Plato, Aristotle, and the Scholastics generally). This attempt to break with the past takes many forms: For Machiavelli, it means a practical political philosophy that focuses on how men *do* live as opposed to how they *ought* to live; for Bacon, it means an empirical, practical science that will coexist with and perhaps ultimately replace the speculations of the ancients; for Descartes, inquiry is to focus upon a practical or useful philosophy that can replace the speculative work then taught in the schools; and finally, for Hobbes, the “vain
philosophy” of the ancients and Scholastics is of no “utility” and is incapable of providing us with the means to acquire the mastery over nature that could alleviate the brute-like conditions of the state of nature. What unites all of these figures is their desire to provide a new aim to philosophy: Modern philosophy is to break with the past inasmuch as its focus will be on utility rather than contemplation.

By my account, what makes Hobbes the founder of modern political philosophy is that he is the first to apply the modern scientific revolution and its utilitarian concept of reason to politics. If Socrates is the founder of ancient political philosophy because he was the first to bring philosophy down from the heavens, then Hobbes is the founder of modern political philosophy because he brought the natural sciences down to man. Thus, for Hobbes, both natural science and political philosophy have a unity of purpose. As Tom Sorell puts it, both natural and civil philosophy “result from reasoning guided by method. And methodical reasoning in the two areas has the same general point or purpose, namely to find ways of improving human life, where that is understood as a matter of enlarging the number of effects producible by the human will.” Michael Oakeshott states more directly, “the end of philosophy itself is power.”

Hobbes writes:

BY PHILOSOPHY is understood the knowledge acquired by reasoning, from the manner of the generation of any thing, to the properties; or from the properties, to some possible way of generation of the same; to the end to be able to produce, as far as matter, and human force permit, such effects, as human life requireth.

Philosophy is science for Hobbes, for it is the conditional knowledge that is acquired through reasoning, the knowledge of causes and effects as ‘generated’ by the Euclidean/resoluto-compositive method. The aim of this knowledge is to bring about certain effects that are desired for the betterment of human life, and thus philosophy has a practical aim. As Giuseppe Mario Saccone points out, there is a unity between the branches of philosophy inasmuch as “men use the same faculty—reason—to interpret everything. Their interpretations start from the perspective of benefit. Such a utilitarian purpose permeates all human knowledge and directs all his action.”

From the perspective of the older tradition of political philosophy stretching back to Plato, what makes Hobbes unique is his denial that reason itself has a theoretical aim. Whereas the ancients and medievals had presupposed that philosophy understood as
contemplation was either the highest of activities or at least the handmaiden to theology, Hobbes fundamentally rejects such a position and inaugurates a new philosophical anthropology that structures all activities along utilitarian lines. The consequences of this shift from the contemplative to the practical is that society must reflect this orientation and is judged by its ability to procure creature comforts rather than provide a locus for the pursuit of Truth. Thus, to speak of a right to transcendent Truth would be a non-starter on the Hobbesian model; even further, Hobbes views the entire ancient and medieval tradition as being so much “vain philosophy” leading to wars over ideas. Asserting that this claim applies to the entirety of the modern liberal tradition would evidently be beyond the scope of the current paper. Yet, I wish to assert in brief that, with notable exceptions such as Spinoza and arguably even Hume (despite his radical skepticism), this larger claim is tenable for at least the main figures in the development of modern liberalism. I conclude this section with just a few examples.

While John Locke, who is more obviously a key figure in the modern liberal tradition than is Hobbes, may have asserted a natural proclivity to society that is absent in Hobbes, he does not disagree with him about the aims of philosophy itself. Like Hobbes, Locke does not see a way to get past the perspective that the senses present to us: Such ‘secondary’ qualities as color, sound, and taste are not reflective of the bodies that surround us, yet, since all knowledge is built on sense, we can never get to the things themselves. Though Locke is aware that knowledge of the world is always of appearances, he is content with probability, with a moral certitude for daily life. This concept of reason as incapable of metaphysical truth and yet competent for our daily affairs pervades his thought.

With Rousseau and Kant, this turn to practical reason in light of the failure of theoretical reason is more obvious. In *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau sees theoretical reason as the source of human misery rather than its perfection, and offers a novel interpretation of Socrates’ response to the Oracle: On Rousseau’s account, Socrates supposedly professed his ignorance as a good thing, interpreting the Oracle to mean that Socrates was happiest because he was most ignorant! Kant, while not necessarily praising ignorance, denies to human knowing a grasp of things in themselves, and cautions us against trying to get past the “fog bank” of illusion. In sum, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant share in Hobbes’s skepticism about the possibility of knowledge and turn instead to practical reason as the highest of human faculties. Thus, the modern liberal political tradition is in no position to appreciate the claim that there is a right to transcendent Truth.
3. Contemplative Citizens in the Modern Liberal Regime

In the first section, I asserted that much of what is found in modern liberalism was already present in late medieval and renaissance political theory. In the second, I asserted that modern liberalism is built on a philosophical anthropology that is problematic in light of the right to transcendent Truth. As deadly as the flawed individualism characteristic of modern thought that the communitarians reject is to civil life, the rejection of Truth as the aim of human life is even more disturbing. In this section, I briefly discuss Jean Bodin’s political philosophy.

What makes Bodin of particular interest is that he is often seen as the necessary precursor to Hobbes as the first theorist of indivisible sovereignty, yet his philosophical anthropology sets him against the birth of modern liberalism. In terms of the fundamental nature of the right to transcendent Truth, Bodin’s doctrine is perfectly compatible with Catholic doctrine. Unlike such seminal modern liberal theorists as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Bodin does not build his system on the rejection of Truth as the aim of human life; rather, he presupposes a classical and Christian anthropology. The lesson to be gleaned from an examination of Bodin’s political theory is that, as stated when discussing the key features of modern liberalism, it is possible to embrace the general trajectory of modern political developments while simultaneously rejecting the ideology often associated with it. This approach is intended to support the ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ that recognizes such documents as Dignitatis Humanae as part of the Church’s attempt to search “into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the church” for legitimate foundations for modern political developments.

The first difference between Bodin and Hobbes is that Bodin retains the traditional view of humans as social and political animals. His definition of a commonwealth is, “the rightly ordered government of a number of families, and of those things which are their common concern, by a sovereign power.” He goes on to say that the family is the “true source and origin of the commonwealth” and “the household is the model of right order in the commonwealth.” Thus, even if we could call Bodin an absolutist, it is of a mitigated variety, in that it does not reduce the commonwealth to isolated individuals ruled by an unlimited sovereign.

Second, and more importantly for the purposes of trying to find a home for the notion of the right to transcendent Truth, Bodin unqualifiedly affirms the telos of human nature to be contemplation:
[T]he sovereign good of the commonwealth in general, and of each of its citizens in particular lies in the intellective and contemplative virtues…. It is generally agreed that the ultimate purpose, and therefore sovereign good, of the individual, consists in the constant contemplation of things human, natural, and divine.58

Bodin’s theory of the soul follows the traditional distinction between speculative and practical reason, giving the highest place in the commonwealth to those who live in terms of the speculative part of the soul, namely, priests and philosophers.59

Bodin straddles the medieval and modern worlds, and to look back at such figures provides us a glimpse as to what modernity could have been had it not been built on faulty foundations. While Maritain and others may be right to reject the theory of indivisible sovereignty that modern liberalism inherited from Bodin, if Julian H. Franklin is correct, this theory is an accretion as a result of political circumstances (viz., the St. Bartholomew Massacre of 1572) that does not shape Bodin’s general theory.60 The problem is not the doctrine of sovereignty as such, but that of indivisible sovereignty: Catholic theorists, even if not using the term, regularly spoke of sovereignty within the secular and sacred realms that mutually limited each other’s jurisdiction, and the constitutionalist tradition spoke of mixed regimes in which sovereignty was shared.61 My aim in highlighting Bodin’s political philosophy is not to lionize him as a model for our times, as others have done to Althusius,62 nor is it to ‘turn back the clock’ to pre-modern theories, for the political contexts that gave rise to the problems and questions for the societies out of which these theories grew have long passed. Yet, I want to second John Dickinson’s view, “… it must not be forgotten that the modern world is the direct heir of medieval institutions and ideas, while it is the heir of classical antiquity only indirectly.”63 Further, in these early days of the Church’s openness to dialogue with modernity, it is best that we bear in mind the inestimable value of the discourse within the Church that gave rise to the many fruits we can pluck from current political realities.

4. Conclusion: Pope Benedict XVI on American Liberal Democracy

Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the U.S. in the spring of 2008 affords, in retrospect, a chance for American Catholics to reflect on those aspects of our political tradition that ought to be brought to the fore in affirming the American experiment in self-government. In
particular, the Holy Father spoke favorably of the American political tradition’s roots in natural law, respect for the human pursuit of happiness, and, most significantly, its recognition of the importance of religion.\textsuperscript{64}

In the Holy Father’s opening address on the south White House lawn (Wednesday, 16 April 2008), he praised the American understanding of freedom for being rooted in a divinely-ordained morality; he spoke of the religious convictions that led us to purge ourselves of slavery and legally-enshrined racism; and he drew a parallel between John Paul II’s claim that respect for Truth is a \textit{sine qua non} of freedom and George Washington’s claim that religion and morality are the pillars of political prosperity.

In his address to representatives of other religions (“Rotunda” Hall of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center of Washington, D.C., Thursday, 17 April 2008), Benedict reminded his audience that the American tradition of interreligious dialogue must not lose sight of this connection between freedom and Truth. The aim of interreligious dialogue is not a relativistic celebration of whatever one happens to believe, but a sharing in the pursuit of Truth:

Religious freedom, interreligious dialogue and faith-based education aim at something more than a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for advancing peace. The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth. What is the origin and destiny of mankind? What are good and evil? What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence? Only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis for the peace and security of the human family….\textsuperscript{65}

Religious freedom, the most fundamental freedom and source of all others, is freedom \textit{for} Truth, not \textit{from} Truth. This call to take up our God-given right to transcendent Truth is the first concern of the Church as She continues to dialogue with modern liberalism.
Notes

1. The most comprehensive guide to the rapprochement between Catholicism and liberalism is *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). One of its limitations is that the contributors to this volume tend to be focused on nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberalism, whereas the current essay attempts to capture the emergence of the modern liberal tradition in the seventeenth century and following. For a more recent study that does attempt to work back to the roots of modern liberalism, see Thomas W. Smith, “Catholic Social Thought and Modern Liberal Democracy, *Logos* 11.1 (2008): 15-48.


4. See, e.g., Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae* 2.

5. As Joseph A. Komonchak points out, Vatican II’s call to aggiornamento was predicated on the view that rights must be grounded in the duty to seek Truth (see Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism” in *Catholicism and Liberalism*, 84.

6. Examples of the difficulties include assessing whether the various ‘-isms’ found in contemporary politics (e.g. conservatism, republicanism, libertarianism, communitarianism, socialism, and communism) are to be seen as competitors to modern liberalism or various manifestations of the liberal tradition. On my reading, the latter is closer to the truth and the difficulty in seeing this point is the result of confusing political parties with political doctrines. Thus, for example, both American conservatives and liberals tend to use the language of freedom, of rights, of separation of church and state, etc., and yet disagree about what it means to respect these commitments. More theoretically, as Vickie B. Sullivan ably shows (in *Machiavelli, Hobbes, & the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), even the distinction between liberalism and republicanism as theories rather than as political parties is not as clear as one might think.

7. See *Rethinking Rights: Historical, Political, and Philosophical Perspectives*, edited by Bruce P. Frohnen and Kenneth L. Grasso (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2009) for an example of how the language of rights we tend to associate with the modern liberal
tradition and which many Catholics find problematic can be embraced without falling into a flawed philosophical anthropology. 


9. For example, despite his Aristotelian vision of political life, Dante focuses on peace and liberty as the concerns of the state (see De Monarchia I.4, 12).

10. See John Courtney Murray, We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 202-4.


12. See John Neville Figgis, Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625 (New York: Harper Press, 1960), 5. For examples of the uses of this imagery, see John of Salisbury, Poliorcaticus V, VI; Dante Alighieri, De Monarchia III.15; Nicholas of Cusa, De Concordantia Catholica, Preface; Robert Bellarmine, De Summo Pontifice I.6. John Dickinson seems to be correct in asserting that the body politic imagery is traceable “to the Christian identification of the Church with the body of Christ” (John Dickinson, introduction to John of Salisbury, The Statesman’s Book (Books 4, 5, and 6, and selections from 7 and 8 from Poliorcaticus), John Dickinson, trans. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), xx).

13. According to J.A. Watt, John of Paris (1250?-1304) was among the first to separate politics from theology (see J.A. Watt, introduction to John of Paris, On Royal and Papal Power, J.A. Watt, trans. [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971], 14). The classic distinction made in the late medieval period was between temporal and spiritual authority. The pope was said to have temporal power only “indirectly” to the extent to which he could excommunicate. See, e.g., John of Paris, chs. 1-5; Marsilius of Padua, Defensor Pacis II; Luis Molina, De Jure et Justitia I.II.21; Franciscus de Victoria, De Indis et De Iure Belli I.2; Bellarmine I.7, V.6.


18. See Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* VI.

19. See Robert Jackson, “Sovereignty in World Politics: A Glance at the Conceptual and Historical Landscape”, *Political Studies* 47.3 (1999), 437; Watt claims that the term was used in the early twelfth century in France, and that thirteenth-century French lawyers used it routinely (see John of Paris, 17-18).


22. Bodin, for example, claims that “the principal mark of sovereign majesty and absolute power is the right to impose laws generally on all subjects regardless of their consent” (Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, M.J. Tooley, trans. (New York: MacMillan Co., 1955), Book I, 32).

23. For the sake of brevity this account leaves aside technical distinctions between the two types of contract (between 1) the people; 2) the people and their ruler) and other aspects of this tradition. For a fuller account of the tradition of social contract theory, see J.W. Gough, *The Social Contract: A Critical Study of its Development* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

24. See Juan de Mariana, *De Rege et Regis Institutione* I.1-3.


University Press, 1992), ch. 8, for an introduction to the historical development from 'right’ to ‘rights’ and an attempt to salvage the modern liberal emphasis on rights by maintaining the connection between rights and justice. On the connection between freedom and rights, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., The Sources of Christian Ethics, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), chapters 14-15, on the distinction between “freedom of indifference” and “freedom for excellence.” Connecting rights to excellence rather than indifference or autonomy would be a way to ground rights in Catholic anthropology.

28. See David Hollenbach, SJ, “A Communitarian Reconstruction of Human Rights: Contributions from Catholic Tradition” in Catholicism and Liberalism, esp. 127-132, 139-140, for background on some of the debates among Catholics over the Church’s acceptance of the language of rights.


30. This view is found among Christians as far back as the early second century; see, e.g., the anonymous Letter to Diognetes.

31. As Komonchak (89) points out, Vatican II accepted liberal political structures, but remained critical of liberal ideology.

32. As just one example, I agree with Komonchak’s claim that the Church has come to accept the notion of rights as part of the fundamental terminology of political discourse, though it has placed these rights within the locus of the community rather than the individual (see Komonchak, 90). For a broader discussion of the Church’s acceptance of the language of rights, see Hollenbach.


34. “Natural Philosophy is therefore but young; but Civil Philosophy yet much younger, as being no older . . . than my own book De Cive” (De Corpore Epistle Dedicatory, EW I, ix).

Discourses of the Philosophers of Every Sect (Thoemmes, 2001; first published in 1655) was very influential in England, is of particular interest (see 163-203).
38. See Hugo Grotius, De Iure Belli, preliminary discourse.
39. See, for example, Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince, ch. 15.
40. See Francis Bacon, Novum Organum, Author’s Preface.
41. See Descartes, Discourse on Method, Discourse 6.
42. See Hobbes, Leviathan, 46.
45. Leviathan 46, 478; emphasis in original; cf. De Cive Epistle Dedicatory, EW II, iii-iv:

Wisdom, properly so called, is nothing else but this: the perfect knowledge of the truth in all matters whatsoever. Which being derived from the registers and records of things; and that as it were through the conduit of certain definite appellations; cannot possibly be the work of a sudden acuteness, but of a well-balanced reason; which by the compendium of a word, we call philosophy. For by this it is that a way is opened to us, in which we travel from the contemplation of particular things to the inference or result of universal actions.

The summary definition in De Corpore more clearly emphasizes that philosophy is a knowledge of appearances: “Philosophy is the knowledge we acquire, by true ratiocination, of appearances, or apparent effects, from the knowledge we have of some possible production or generation of the same; and of such production, as has been or may be, from the knowledge we have of the effects” (De Corpore I.VI.1, EW I, 65-6). See De Corpore I.I.1-10, EW I, 1-12, for a fuller treatment of the nature of philosophy. In section 6 (Ibid. 7) he reiterates
that the “end or scope of philosophy is, that we may make use to our benefit of effects formerly seen . . . for the commodity of human life”.

46. See Oakeshott on this point; he calls Hobbesian philosophy, “the establishment by reasoning of hypothetical causes” (Oakeshott, 10).

47. See Sorell, 1.

48. Saccone, 12.


51. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Arts and Sciences Part One.


53. In the cases of Rousseau and Kant, the aesthetic arguably replaces the theoretical.

54. See for example, Peters, 201.

55. Dignitatis Humanae 1.

56. Bodin I, 1; cf. ibid. III, 97-105.

57. Ibid., 6.

58. Ibid., 2-3. It is worth noting that Bodin turned to the contemplative life in his last days; see Bodin xiii-xiv.

59. Ibid. V, 154; however, elsewhere he claims that the king “supplies the rational and contemplative element” (VI, 212).


61. Even St. Robert Bellarmine, for example, who is usually associated with a strong monarchic theory, asserts that the best form of government for fallen humans is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (see Bellarmine I.1, 3).

62. There are numerous problems with Bodin’s theory, e.g., his views on the rights of husbands over their wives and children (Bodin I, 10-13) and his denial of the distinction between good and bad regimes (Bodin II, 51).

63. John Dickinson, preface to John of Salisbury, xi.
64. For a brief history of the tensions between American Catholics and American liberalism, see Philip Gleason, “American Catholics and Liberalism, 1789-1960” in *Catholicism and Liberalism*.