The Political Thought of Frederick D. Wilhelmsen
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It is uncommon, especially in the United States of America (the vanguard of our democratic age), for people to oppose the supposed sanctity of democratic government—American Catholics included. They have tended toward, especially during the Cold War, the long-held evangelical Protestant view that democracy was God’s system (or at least was compatible with Catholicism). The Roman Catholic philosopher and public intellectual Frederick D. Wilhelmsen (1923–1996) lamented this liberal-democratic consensus; for him, American democracy was potentially anti-Christian, incompatible with the Kingship of Christ, in that ultimate authority in the social order tended to reside in the people, not Christ.

Known in academic circles mostly for his Thomistic philosophizing about man’s existence and knowledge (from the mid-twentieth century until its last decade—principally as a philosophy professor at the University of Dallas), Frederick D. Wilhelmsen (1923–1996) was less well known for his political views, although they were prevalent in his corpus, most certainly because he contemplated American politics through the exoticness of both the ideal of a Catholic confessional order and the European monarchical tradition. The historical context for Wilhelmsen and his uncommon political views was the Cold War, which fomented, because it was perceived to be a deadly challenge, an interest in political self-definition, a collective “know-thyself” moment. Exceptional and tumultuous transformations in American society in the fifties, sixties, and seventies also spurred this collective introspection. For the Catholic Wilhelmsen, the convergence of these developments with profound change within the Roman Catholic Church, including the mainstreaming of Catholicism in American society, revived a long debate over the compatibility of Catholicism with Americanism and thus intensified his quest to know America.

Wilhelmsen stood apart from both the liberal Catholic position, which seemed intent on baptizing American democracy (via liberal outlets such as The Commonweal), and conservative Catholics (via National Review), who celebrated the American system but wished to define it differently than liberal Catholics. They viewed the American system as a republic: as anti-majoritarian (an emphasis on the law over a majority of the people, especially including the trumping authority of the Natural Law), as anti-
egalitarian (social hierarchy was natural), as a trustee system for political leadership, and as one of religious liberty, but also needing Christianity. For Wilhelmsen, the American system, whatever its original appearance, had within its nature a potency that flowered into a democratic absolutism. Such a system was incompatible with the Catholic faith, given Christ's injunction for His Church to transfigure the world "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Given that Christ is "the way and the truth and the life," this system militated against what was consubstantial with man's existence, the urge to live within a sacral society, one essentially Christian, crowned by a political order that confessed Christ's sovereignty.

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

For Wilhelmsen, there were two intertwining problems with the American political system—a faulty governing mechanism (the actual mechanism established by the Constitution that rooted authority and power in the people, not God) and a flawed public orthodoxy (the core beliefs of a society which increasingly deified man). If the governing mechanism was subordinate to the public orthodoxy, each component was important to the existence of the other; they were interrelated, but they were not the same. Their acting and reacting upon one another, a natural process, eventually fostered a democratic absolutism in the United States in which the people—acting as a majority—assumed an absolute power, which, in effect, was a denial that power came from Christ and an assertion that it should not be specified by His moral authority (via His Church).

The governing mechanism was flawed in a threefold—but intertwining—manner. The framers did not institute a Christian establishment, and they rooted authority and power in the people (not God), and constructed a system designed to pit varying interests against one another to diffuse power to protect and promote liberty (as the end of government). The latter was a secular proposition as it was a rejection of aiding obedience to God as a purpose of government (the objective, Wilhelmsen maintained, of a Christian politics). Yet, what if the creators supposed—or assumed—that as a people Americans generally were Christian (or, at the least, monotheistic) and would infuse obedience to God into the governing system? (The religious clauses of First Amendment, for example, should be understood—considering the historical context—as establishing religious liberty, not as completely separating politics from religion.) Possibly, then, the people would put their power under God's authority if Christianity remained the substance of belief of the republic. The founders created a framework, however, in which the people could do the opposite (liberty...
for the people—via competition—was its ultimate end). What if the people decided to abandon their Christian faith? In any case, they developed a system that did not recognize an authority higher than the people.

Given this analysis, Wilhelmsen contended that the Constitution was a mechanism that facilitated a democratic absolutism. The creators rooted power and authority in the people. Seemingly, they designed the system to restrain the people (the power) through written—so-called fundamental—law (the authority) and instituted institutional checks and balances to specifically prevent democratic absolutism, or any kind of absolutism. Yet, “the People” of the Constitution assumed an absolute power, because they identified themselves as the font of this governing charter, which was a contract with an implied violability (because of their absolute sovereignty). They created a system that did not recognize an authority separate from the power, the people. For Wilhelmsen, the power in a social order must be, in order to avoid becoming an unlimited power (and thus tyrannical), informed, checked, or specified by an authority outside itself.7

Frederick Wilhelmsen, furthermore, did not believe that the framers’ tripartite mechanism—in which the people could check the people—thwarted a democratic absolutism, but thought it was an attempt to check an already absolutist conception of government. “Montesquieu,” he wrote, “tried to find freedom within the content of the state he knew.”8 “If power is so divided into three that any one or two of these powers can check excessive encroachments by the third,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “then that power—be it legislative, judicial, or executive—is both what it is as a constituted power, plus its being an authority over neighboring powers that it pretends to judge.”9

Mechanically, then, the American political system was faulty. Yet, what of Father John Courtney Murray’s thesis that the Natural Law informed the American founding?10 It was non-existent operatively as there was no enforcement mechanism for it in the American system. If a society “wishes to safeguard the natural law in a political fashion,” he wrote, “then it must contrive some institution, itself having the force of positive law and the power of the sword, entrusted with ensuring the public acceptance of natural law.”11 “The American Constitution was an instrument which attempted to resolve fundamental problems not by creating a tribunal which represented the natural law in its universal and ultimate character,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “but by planning in tension the diverse interests of the people.”12 There “was,” then, he noted, “no ultimate authority in the whole Federal system capable of defending the natural law. The system was built to avoid an appeal to an ultimate authority,” including—most importantly—the Natural Law’s interpreter, Christ’s Church.13
Yet, this mechanical failure to encapsulate the Natural Law pointed to a more fundamental problem in the American system, a flawed public orthodoxy. For Wilhelmsen, laws or charters do not govern, but rather human beings, and usually they govern according to a network of core beliefs (in this sense, all political systems were representative of their societies, if not representative democracies). This public orthodoxy informed—if it was not the governing form—the governing mechanism and the way men governed.

He viewed the public orthodoxy of the founding period—even if it had Natural Law underpinnings and a societal deference to Christ—as burdened by the influence of the concoction of Calvinism and Enlightenment rationalism. Both elements informed and thus corrupted the American political tradition’s commitment to Natural Law. Calvinism emphasized “a total corruption of man by original sin,” while Enlightenment rationalism posited a “historicism,” both of which undermined faith in the Natural Law. “Unless human nature enjoys a certain stability the center of which is intrinsically good and not corrupted by sin,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “it is useless to speak about a common good rooted in a finality supposedly discovered within the substance of man.”

The anti-Catholic Christian trajectory of modernity exacerbated the latent anti-Natural Law tendencies in the founding American public orthodoxy, which in turn informed the actual system with an unbounded faith in the majority as an absolute power—that a document supposedly created the American governing system intensified this interaction. “America—in quite a literal and literary sense of the term—was founded as a nation by being written down on paper. . . . America,” he wrote, “hammered out its corporate meaning in print.” Meaning, then, not being (a lived arrangement), was vital to the understanding of the Constitution, which was susceptible to reinterpretation or manipulation “as are all written objects. . . . America,” he wrote, “has been one long and often-brilliant debate about her own meaning.” The United States, he implied, could be born again in each successive generation.

The predominance of liberalism in contemporary America (the cause of individual liberty), in part, spurred this anti-Catholic trajectory. The liberal faith in government’s ability to remake society according to abstract conceptions of rights in nature, as ends in themselves, not only advanced the absolutist state practically, but unchained man morally and helped produce “the solipsistic totalitarianism of the individual conscience claiming its ‘rights’ against the common good,” and over any authority outside itself (namely God). The latter contributed to man’s ordination of himself as ultimately sovereign—thus ignoring or banishing the God-man in favor
of the man-god—and generating democratic absolutism (the man-god writ large). Yet, liberalism was a mere part of an even more encompassing problem.

For Wilhelmsen, America, like the rest of the modern West, suffered from an alienation from being, which was a developmental occurrence that had many causes, which entailed either an intended rejection or ignorance of existence (being) as an act of God. That is, man is because God is. Yet, this gift, being, in Wilhelmsen’s Thomistic metaphysics, “is better understood vertically as an act which is being done, exercised by the Lord God, in the present moment. He gave me being in the past but that being,” he wrote, “must not be imagined as though it were the gift of a coat handed me yesterday and worn today.”

The loss of being is the loss of our awareness of our dependency on God, that our existential identity is God (we are the beings of God—though not of God’s being), which frustrates our ontological urge to return the love that is the cause of our existence, of creation—which is the effluence of God’s love—to seek Him in Whom we are. The loss of being, then, distanced man from God and His creation. Man, without an awareness of being, began to proclaim his own divinity, viewing himself as existing in his power to become something other than what he was, and believing that creation (imagined without—or disconnected from—God) was at his behest, which he sought to remake in his image, his new god. Remaking the world in his own image included constructing a political order over which he, not God, was sovereign. Democratic absolutism comported to the metaphysics of a man holding his existence in his own power; it was the (political) extrapolation of man as his own absolute sovereign, a self-ruler.

Severed from Christ in both the non-Catholic confessional mechanism established by the framers—that did not proclaim even some vague monotheism, let alone Christ’s Kingship—and given an anthropocentrically seeded public orthodoxy that increasingly confessed man’s divinity, an adherence to the Natural Law withered. The Natural Law in the American context lacked authority, then, because it lacked legitimacy, legality, and loyalty, because it was not rooted in a transcendent personality—it lacked a link to the Person of Christ, His Authority (via His Church), both politically and socially.

Without the Natural Law, the rule of the majority exceeded any merely procedural understandings of its power and morphed into an absolutist power, assuming all authority and power unto itself, which “meant that there is a ‘law’ superior to the ‘natural law,’ that law of the will of the fifty per cent plus one,” which “becomes the very first of laws.”

The absolute
power of the people, therefore, was both cause and effect of the demise of the Natural Law—without it, the people were supreme (both the authority and the power) and as an absolute power they could not recognize any law anterior and superior to their authority. "The democratic principle," Wilhelmsen concluded, "is unwritten orthodoxy in the United States... This principle has simply taken the place of all older orthodoxies and today plays the role that natural law once played in Western civilization."23

In any case, the Natural Law would remain a stunted guide in secular and Protestant America (the Reformed tradition, as noted, could not affirm a moral understanding in our reasonable nature). Yet, even more importantly, secular and Protestant America—the Reformed tradition did not view creation as a potential means of grace—did not provide sufficient access to actual and sanctifying graces (which help us adhere to the Natural Law). It "is the grace of God that gets us through the adverse tides of temptation and the storms around. Although we might well be guided by the natural law," Wilhelmsen wrote, "it is the Grace of God proffering His Divine Will, united always with the Cross of Christ, which saves and alone saves, that pulls us through."24

MODERN POLITICS

For Frederick Wilhelmsen, the United States' governing mechanism and the public orthodoxy that informed it was and was not a so-called new order of the ages. On the one hand, he viewed the American political system as a continuation of the European political trajectory to an absolutist state since the sixteenth century, fostered by the convergent developments of political theories justifying the terrestrial acquisition of absolute power (which denied Christ's sovereignty) and the Protestant Rebellion (which shattered Christ's authority, via His Church). He wrote, for example, "That the French Revolution"—supposedly the spawning moment of the Age of Liberty—merely "converted the Will of the Prince into the Will of the Majority," which "was simply a democratic flourish to a... [development, which] had already largely been written."25 It was about the "peoples' will to power," not about limiting power.26 The French Revolution, the essence of which, Wilhelmsen wrote, was "the denial of man's relation to the Transcendent, the assertion of man as autonomous, himself the source of all rights," championed absolutism via the concept of government as representative of the people and seeking to establish their individual, absolute, and autonomous rights.27 The French Revolutionaries merely murdered the monarchical form, but embraced absolutism; they rooted power not in divine right, but solely in man's (rational) authority. Yet, it is also true that at times he tempered this view, conceptualizing the United States as
somewhat different from European absolutism. This could have resulted from his friendships with Russell Kirk and especially Melvin Bradford, a colleague at the University of Dallas. These intellectuals posited, in varying ways, that the Constitution was principally procedural—rather than a document defining rights—and anti-majoritarian, non-egalitarian, and rooted in Classical and Christian antecedents via the English political tradition, and thus not a new order for the ages, born in abstract Enlightenment conceptions of man and the political order. Occasionally, then, both culturally and politically—if not metaphysically, morally, or religiously—Wilhelmsen found the American political system to be medieval. Regardless, he believed that such a founding still was “wounded by the crippling influences of a Puritan soul, [and] damaged by the influence of the rationalist Enlightenment.”

On the other hand, Wilhelmsen viewed the sixteenth-century developments that ushered in absolutism as different from government in the preceding Middle Ages. He posited that medieval, dynastic monarchy maintained a division between authority and power. In such a system, the king held all power, but he and society recognized it as delegated by Christ and thus ultimately subject to His moral authority (via His Church—“God’s Authority on earth”). Authority also resided in varying degrees—because the king was not the authority, but the power at the service of the commonwealth—in the aristocracy, the common law, the free universities, the guilds, the regional assemblies, the regional laws, the self-governing townships, and the peasantry. The king was not dependent upon these authorities, he held all power, but his power was restrained, Wilhelmsen wrote, as “all authority—multiple and hierarchically structured—belonged to Society itself.”

This separation of authority and power was the key point in the superiority of medieval over modern politics, as it authentically restrained the power of government and prevented it from becoming an absolute power. This separation reached its optimum division during the Middle Ages, because the Christian faith informed society, which fostered what Wilhelmsen labeled the “Christian politics of transcendence.”

Medieval man accepted the Trinitarian God as sovereign. If only God was sovereign, then medieval man reflexively viewed any terrestrial power as delegated by God and thus subject to His authority. God’s ultimate power comes from—is—His ultimate wisdom (or authority). “If sovereignty pertains to the fullness of authority,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “then only God is sovereign because only he speaks with an underived authority,” which cannot be delegated but only communicated (as all authority is personal). In this way, secular power, not being Christ (the underived

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Wisdom/Truth of the Father), could not invoke His authority itself, but only a power delegated by Christ (Who inherited power from His Father in His victory over Satan upon the cross).\textsuperscript{34} That is, Christ delegated all temporal power (all power is delegated as it comes from a power greater than itself), but this was not a theocracy, this was delegated power, intended to guide men to their temporal happiness, while the spiritual realm, governed by the Church, “guides men to their salvation: this is its finality.”\textsuperscript{35} They were two distinct realms—yet, ideally, “the political order must be quickened, vivified,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “by the moral principles proclaimed by the Church whose Head is Christ.”\textsuperscript{36}

The transition away from such a division of sovereignty, Wilhelmsen argued, began with the French political theorist, Jean Bodin, who immanentized sovereignty by locating it “within terrestrial existence, within politics as such.”\textsuperscript{37} Bodin, Wilhelmsen wrote, “identified the power of the Prince with an Authority which was Absolute and which resided in himself. He thus rendered the Prince a Sovereign in the full ontological, and not merely in the ceremonial sense of the term.”\textsuperscript{38} “The new Prince governed according to a Sovereignty,” he noted, “which was his own, a Power united to an Authority which was unbounded and unlimited. [He was] the font of law as well as of Authority.”\textsuperscript{39} This led to the “divinization of political existence.”\textsuperscript{40} This process of the prince assuming all authority and power unto himself smashed the dichotomy that existed in the medieval conception of sovereignty. “Any harmonizing of Power and the Wisdom from which comes Authority is possible only under two conditions: 1) either Power is identically Wisdom . . . or 2) Power is limited from outside itself. Power,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “can remain absolute and good only when it is Divine. If Power is to act other than in a merely powerful way, if Power is to act wisely and prudently in harmony with justice and truth,” he noted, “then Power must be specified or limited by dimensions of being that are not formally identified with Power as such.”\textsuperscript{41} He deduced this from his Thomistic metaphysics. “Power must live on the side of existence. . . . In God, Power is one with Being, but nowhere can we discover—within Being itself—any specification or determination of Power. This specification,” he wrote, “itself always some limitation, must come from a principle not identically Power: i.e., the order of essence or the determination of existence. An unlimited Power, which is not God, is a metaphysical monstrosity.”\textsuperscript{42}

Absolute terrestrial power was a moral abomination, “‘essentially [an] Anti-Christian Power and . . . simultaneously’”—Wilhelmsen quoted the Spanish political theorist, Juan Donoso Cortés—“‘an outrage done the majesty of God and the dignity of man. . . . Unlimited Power is also an
idolatry in the subject because he adores the king; idolatry in the king because he worships himself.”

Explicating the views of Donoso, Wilhelmsen noted that this conception of power violated the Trinitarian structure of existence, “the law of unity in variety and variety in unity” which comported to Wilhelmsen’s Christian metaphysics of a paradoxical structure of existence that was complex, diversified, but unified in its being because of God. “Whereas uniformity and univocity govern the rationalist and liberal universe,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “variety and unity rule the Christian traditionalist world.” Donoso “finds his supreme principle of being working within political existence in the following fashion,” Wilhelmsen wrote: “in society unity manifests itself through Power, and variety manifests itself through hierarchies [of authority from the Church to medieval parliaments].” Both are, he noted, “inviolable and sacred. Their co-existence is simultaneously the fulfillment of the will of God and the assurance of the liberty of the people [as power is restrained by an authority outside itself].”

The Protestant Revolution aided the development of the absolutist state. It undermined the moral authority of the Roman Catholic Church—its claim to speak for God on earth—which precipitated the state’s absorption of moral authority unto itself. The Protestant Reformation’s trajectory to both “immediacy” and an emphasis on the individual conscience (informed by personal interpretation of the Bible) over the Church and its understanding that grace was non-mediated, undermined the confessional political order (that political power should be put at the service of Christ’s moral authority via His Church). There was no need in the Protestant view to enforce the preeminence of the Roman Catholic Church or ensure avenues to its sanctifying grace if the Church was supererogatory to salvation, indeed such an order might frustrate religious belief and worship by attempting to bind the individual conscience in matters of faith and morals. Indeed, American Protestants became leading advocates of the “separation” of church and state—not merely religious liberty—because they increasingly could not tolerate any faith’s claim of moral authority over the individual (especially the Roman Catholic Church’s claim), which seemed tyrannical. Protestantism, then, “separated religion from politics by allowing a ‘totally vertical and individualist’ relationship with God and denied any ‘horizontal’ role for religion for ‘fashioning the social and political order.’” The modern, secular state sought to fulfill the civilizing role once reserved for the Church.
The ultimate solution to these political ills, which were leading to anarchy, was the Catholic-Christianization of society—to restore a faith in Christ’s moral authority (via His Church) over man and society. The latter would entail the construction of a confessional order, to seal this commitment to Christ in the public order. This new order was a theoretical construct, but derived from Wilhelmsen’s conception of historic Christendom, which could never be restored in its actuality, but rather could serve as inspiration for a future Christendom.

The wellness of this new civilized order would depend upon the political order representing the public orthodoxy. For Wilhelmsen, the health of this political order, most importantly, would depend upon how closely the public orthodoxy (given that at their heart, public orthodoxies were a society’s view of its existence and purpose) conformed to a Catholic-Christian view of being, that of viewing “all things as holding existence on suffrage from the Lord.”

This metaphysical view perpetuates fidelity (out of love) to God from Whom man—because of love—is. This Divine love was made flesh in Christ, Who through the Cross redeems creation. This love beckons man to imitate the Incarnate God, Who, because of love, lifts up the world in the Spirit by giving Himself as an offering to the Father to redeem man. Man, then, because of love, gives of himself to redeem the world (to take part in Christ’s redemptive mission), incarnating this love, gesturing it forth to the world by signing it with the cross and thereby carrying it back to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The injunction of the Incarnation is, Wilhelmsen wrote, “to fashion creation anew and to hallow all things so that they might participate in the Redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of the Cross.”

This sacralizing mission, to hallow all things in Christ, is intrinsic to man, an ontological urge to return to the Trinitarian God, from Whom, through Whom, and in Whom he is. This redemptive-sacralizing mission would generate a sacral society, one marked with the faith of the cross and thus filled with symbols of salvation in Christ, sacramentals or actual graces, that direct man to Christ, especially the sanctifying grace poured out through His Church—also made more prevalent in a sacral society—that saves man and brings him to Christ. “I take as revealed the following proposition,” Wilhelmsen wrote: “God wills every man to be saved. I take it as evident that he is more easily saved in a society that buoys himself up in the Faith, that surrounds him with symbols of his salvation.” This is because grace, although it always perfects nature and “can operate in
human nature at any time and under any conditions,” “operates the better, the more perfected man is on the natural level.”53 Therefore, he concluded, “man is better off in a sacral order than out of it.”54

The confessional order would develop naturally from a sacral society. As a Christian man gestures his faith to the world, as his fidelity to Christ and his living are one, so a sacral society, analogously, would publicly confess its devotion to Christ, as its allegiance to Him and its existence are one. Man is a “unity in existence;” he could not sanely compartmentalize his faith in Christ and live it only in something called the “private sphere.”55 He is not divided within himself, a duality in existence, both a temporal and a spiritual being, because he is neither, but rather an “enfleshed spirit.”56 If man is the faith (though the faith is not him), if grace weaves the Cross into his heart and mind, and if man communicates himself forth to the world, then his faith and living are necessarily one.57 Catholic men, then, would construct a political order that is an extension of themselves, in the service of the “God-Man.”58 The confessional order would serve as a further aid in directing man to Christ. It would reinforce and shield the sacral society. This political order, separate from the spiritual order governed by the Church, would subject its power to the moral authority of Christ’s Church, adhere to the moral law, and generally confess the Roman Catholic faith, including enforcing its preeminence in society.

The confessional order would be truly legitimate because it would recognize the true sovereign of creation, Christ. Christ’s Kingship over existence exists, whether recognized or not. Christ, as St. John notes, is “prince of the kings of the earth” and St. Matthew writes, “all power in heaven and on earth,” is given to Him.59 “Christ is King of all Kings,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “Lord of Creation. He has inherited His title from His Father; He has won His title on the cross by His victory over Satan; and He has been recognized in His title by his Infinite Wisdom and Goodness.”60

The purpose of confessional politics would be love, which was the basis of Christ’s mission; he came, as St. Mark writes, “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”61 The political order that confesses Christ’s sovereignty aids man in his quest for salvation (his ultimate purpose) by proscribing vices and providing inducements to obey God and by protecting and aiding the Church’s mission to carry the Cross to the world.

What of liberty and equality in a future confessional order? The recognition of Christ’s sovereignty would check the rise of an absolutist state. First, the political order’s power would be restrained by Christ’s authority (communicated through His Church). Second, such an order would respect and protect the transcendent dignity of the person, who belongs
to God, not the state. Third, following the logic of Christ’s delegation of power to lower governing entities, the confessional order would delegate power to the smallest possible political unit capable of fulfilling “ends consubstantial to itself.” Fourth, the confessional order would foster greater devotion to the law and a more self-governing citizenry, and thus require a less obtrusive government. By helping man obey God, such an order would help liberate him from the slavery of sin. Furthermore, obedience to the law—in conformity with Christ’s authority—would have a higher purpose, love for the Person of Christ, not merely the objective of adhering to a majority, or to the power of some particular class or ruler, or to the law as an end in itself.

In the Roman Catholic context, man has an inviolable free rationality and will, which roots his liberty in his existence (his ability to choose God), not a charter or tradition. The rights derived from this moral existence are not conceptualized as absolute or unlimited rights, but bound by God’s authority. In any case, liberty—understood simply as choice (not the ability to choose)—“could never be an end in itself” for the individual or society, who and which, otherwise, would have to be in perpetual stasis (to maintain choice). Choice could never be an end. The “end” or objective of a society should be love, which meant establishing an order committed to helping people act morally, which would birth a greater liberty, “liberation from evil.” The confessional order, then, could limit choice to ensure the good of the individual and the commonweal. “Love opposes liberty,” Wilhelmsen noted, “only when liberty opposes love.” Yet the latter would not be as oppressive as the modern world would assume, because the actual issue of religious liberty “is a tautology,” he wrote, “when subjected to philosophical analysis. No one can coerce assent to the Faith, not even God Himself.” Anyway, all societies have a certain orthodoxy. The so-called “open society” is a myth. Even the pluralist United States enforces an orthodoxy—the “agreement to disagree.”

Furthermore, the confessional order would not adhere to any abstract concept of equality, but respect the dignity of all persons (for whom Christ died). “We are all equally men but not equal men,” Wilhelmsen wrote. They could neither be equal before the law, nor even have equal opportunities. Man is valuable because he is, because God loves him. Inequalities could offend human dignity, but they do not give or subtract dignity from the person. Given that men are not equal (and are plagued by a fallen nature), and that hierarchy conforms to the divine pattern and that society is engendered not out of the individual, but the family, an “ordered hierarchy,” then a hierarchical ordering to society is naturally necessary for order and harmony.
Yet, in the Christian context, such individual and social differences indicate an obligation to use any advantages to serve others, to imitate Christ. The redemptive mission—to carry the cross to the world—most importantly, includes serving “the least brothers” of the King. Such differentiation among persons and classes also evidenced the need for community—that man needs a “we.” He is stunted as a solitary individual or class.

**DYNASTIC MONARCHY**

Frederick Wilhelmsen believed that a dynastic monarchy would be the political system most conducive to a society that would confess Christ’s sovereignty. As the confessional order needed a society faithful to Christ to work, so Wilhelmsen knew that a monarchy would be dependent upon a monarchical tradition. He believed that a monarchy would be more faithful to—and communicative of—a corporate and organic understanding of society, that the monarchy would be the head of a political body, each dependent upon one another. More importantly, he believed that a monarchy was patterned on the Kingship of Christ.

The confessional-dynastic monarchy would be “analogous to the kingship of Christ,” in a threefold manner. First, in the monarchy, power would be unitary—as is Christ’s sovereignty—providing the unity of action in the political body necessary for order. Power could be delegated—as Christ delegates power—but the king, in the political realm, like Christ over creation, would be the final power. Furthermore, because the monarchy held all power, it would not be a dependent power; the king would tend to be above the political fray and not subject to partisanship or interest groups, which also pointed to the transcendence of the rule of Christ, Who was above all earthly power.

Second, monarchical power would be personal, like the sovereignty of Christ, which also is personal. Christ is a Person. Laws or abstractions, Wilhelmsen was adamant, do not govern men; rather, a person governs them. Men could be more loyal to persons who wield power than to a law or a faceless majority. Such a personal rule would be superior in that it transcends—if beneficially conditioned by—the more abstract and anonymous rule of law. Paradoxically, a monarchy (with all of its otherness from the ordinary subject), would be a more personal form or rule, as the king, a person, rules; whereas democracy, (with all its relatability to the people as it is the people who govern), is a more anonymous rule, as the masses rule.

Third, the basis of legitimacy for monarchy would be dynastic inheritance, like Christ Who inherited his sovereignty from His Father. The
source of legitimacy of such a rule “is paternity,” an ontological ordina-

tion in that such power is—the king’s power is in his being (the son of his

father)—it would not be derived from or dependent upon an election or

legal enactment; it would tend toward the inviolable.78 This ontological

legitimacy would point toward the transcendent origin of power.

Dyanstic monarchy, furthermore, would be rule by a family (the king’s

corrected

power would be in his familial name), and thus would recognize and

shield the family—the “basis,” itself, “for political existence.”79 A man

is not born a man, nor does his identity come solely from within himself.

Men are born into families—structures that “are anterior to all choice,

deeper than all law, more profound than any philosophy”—mini body pol-
litics, incarnating the principles of order, the monarchical, aristocratic, and

democratic elements necessary for political order, power, authority, and

communion (respectively). The latter because man discovers in his family

that his identity is intrinsically communal (or relational)—it is a “we,” the

family, that names him.80 Dyanstic monarchy not only would be rule by a

family, but a rule patterned on the structure of the family, hierarchically

and paternalistically ordered. “Where fathers are kings in their own fami-
lies,” Wilhelmsen wrote, “one of their own—a dynastic king—is father of

all the fathers.”81

In a social order composed of families, which are represented in the

body politic, personhood comports to its ontological structure. “The basic

theological and metaphysical issue at question concerns the very structure

of personhood. If I am principally who I am and not what I am,” Wilhelmsen

wrote, “then society ought to be structured around the family: I am the

Name that I am thanks to my parents. If, on the contrary,” he noted,

“who I am is irrelevant; if the principal question concerning me has to do

with what I am, then democratic individualism ought to have its way.”82

Maintaining the integrity of the family, better ensured by a dynastic mon-

archy, would better safeguard the true dignity of man that his value is

(in his being—it is existing), an identity inherent in familial identity. Con-

versely, man’s identity without family, but deriving solely from himself, is

necessarily transient, because it is principally rooted in the exigencies of

his life. This is the individual cultivated by democracy, which recognizes

only solitary individuals. “One man—one vote! This is the cardinal dogma

of liberal democracy,” Wilhelmsen wrote.83 Democracy, then, did not re-

spect personhood and forfeited order for an individualism only fulfilled in

becoming—rather than being. The solitary life “lived outside the family,”

Wilhelmsen wrote, “permits a man to assume any and every role from

saint to sinner because it never allows that man to be.”84
Wilhelmsen’s criticism of American democracy and his promotion of a confessional order, in addition to his preference for a dynastic monarchy as the governing form, certainly made him an anachronism to both Cold War conservatives and liberal American Catholics. Yet, he would argue that the American government has become an absolute power—and that this development can never be reconciled with Church teaching. What, he would ask, trumps the positive law of the state? What separate authority qualifies its power? That fifty-one percent of the population might change its mind every election does not solve the problem (of checking the state). Indeed the problem is that a majority decision has become conceptualized as more than procedure but as the final authority in society. How, he would plead, could this be reconciled with the Kingship of Christ? Wilhelmsen, if an old voice, urges reappraisal of American democracy, which was the fundamental purpose of his political commentary.

Notes


8. Ibid., 115–16.


12. Ibid., 24.


16. Ibid.


29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 113.
36. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 114.
42. Wilhelmsen, “*The Political Philosophy of Alvaro d’Ors*,” 166.
43. Ibid., 122.
44. Ibid., 119–20.
45. Ibid., 121.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 174.
55. Ibid., 161.
61. Mark 10:45.
67. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Matthew 25:40.
75. Popowski, *The Rise and Fall of Triumph*, 112.
78. Wilhelmsen, “The Political Philosophy of Alvaro d’Ors,” 151.
81. Ibid.; also, see Wilhelmsen, “The Political Philosophy of Alvaro d’Ors,” 153.
82. Ibid.
83. Wilhelmsen, “The Family as the Basis for Political Existence,” 12.