

## ***Are There Two or One?***

### ***Francis Canavan on the Nature of Liberalism***

-by Robert P. Hunt

Much effort has been directed recently by Catholic and other scholars to determine the proper relation between Catholicism, liberalism, and the Western constitutional tradition. At least three major strands of thought seem to have emerged from this effort, and the even more practically significant question of how Catholicism can contribute to the reinvigoration of an American public philosophy of democratic self-government. These three strands might be described in the following way:

1. The Americanist strand of Catholic social thought: Like their predecessors in the 1960s, the Americanists seek to effect a quasi-Hegelian synthesis of Catholicism and liberalism by bracketing the Catholic tradition if not leaving it altogether (or, to paraphrase Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, by “defining Catholicism down”). I will limit myself here to mentioning two examples of this strand. The first is represented by a volume of essays edited by R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, entitled *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Most of the essayists in this volume labor mightily over the question of how each intellectual tradition can give sustenance to the other. In the process, liberalism (when it is defined at all) becomes little more than what Kenneth L. Grasso, in criticizing this approach, describes as “a particular practical political orientation . . . supportive of the cause of constitutionalism, limited government, the rule of law” rather than a particular theory of politics.<sup>2</sup> And Catholicism (when it is not subordinated to the “higher truths” of liberalism or feminism) is reduced to a concern for the common good and a commitment to public discourse; in short, a watery communitarianism. Douglass, himself a non-Catholic, argues that liberals and Catholics could be allies rather than adversaries “on any number of matters” if only they did not allow themselves “to become obsessed with certain particularly divisive issues on which they continue to have deep, abiding differences.”<sup>3</sup> Missing from Douglass’s hoped-for convergence is any consideration of whether or not these conflicting “obsessions” are grounded in two fundamentally different anthropologies and political theories that make dialogue between, and convergence of, these traditions more problematic than Douglass is willing to admit.

The second example of the Americanist strand is J. Leon Hooper’s *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray*, which attempts to portray Murray himself as the progenitor of this convergence theory. He argues that “it is in the public commitment to human attentiveness, intelligence,

and judgment that finally, for Murray [and, we must assume, for Hooper's brand of Catholicism as well] the core and timeless moral reality of human society resides."<sup>4</sup> The final foundational theme for this Americanist strand of Catholicism is an experiential openness, a commitment to a manner of living that democratizes and makes relative all human truth claims and pretensions.

For those who endorse this second way it would seem that civility becomes the *terminus ad quem* of Catholic social thought, and some species of liberal communitarianism becomes the privileged claimant for the American public philosophy. In short, the hallmark of this neo-Americanist strain to the relation between Catholicism and Liberalism is its blurring of the intellectual distinctiveness of each tradition.

2. The "confessionalist" strand of Catholic social thought has its roots in the writings of Joseph Clifford Fenton and Francis Connell published in the 1950s and 1960s. The confessionalists seek to distinguish Catholicism not only from liberalism—defined here more comprehensively as "a particular model of man and society"—but from the Western constitutional tradition's developed commitment to human rights and religious freedom. They argue that any defense of human or natural rights in general, and of the principles of limited government embodied in the religion clauses of our First Amendment in particular, must be made upon prudential rather than principled grounds, as a practical concession to the fact of religious diversity rather than as a statement of the proper ordering of society and state. Ernest Fortin has argued, for example, that the Catholic defense of human rights, as exemplified by the political thought of the Second Vatican Council, has juxtaposed traditional Christian ideas of duties and virtue with "ideas that once were and still may be fundamentally antithetical to it," for instance, natural or human rights doctrines. Fortin's resolution of this "bifocalism" is to recover Christian classicism from any principled commitment to human or natural rights, including that of religious freedom.<sup>5</sup> Rather than "defining Catholicism down," the confessionalist "defines Catholicism back" to its pre-Vatican II political commitments. The hallmark of confessionalism is its sharpening of the Catholic intellectual tradition into an opponent of liberalism and human rights, however narrowly or broadly defined.

3. The "neoconservative" strand of Catholic social thought, led by theorists such as Michael Novak, argues that there is indeed a tension between the Catholic intellectual tradition and most contemporary variants of liberal political thought, concerned as they are with a defense of the unencumbered self and radical personal autonomy. The neoconservative seeks, however, to effect some type of synthesis of Catholicism with an older political and economic liberalism—that of figures such as John Locke or Adam Smith. The neoconservative usually "defines classical liberalism up," seeing it as a particular political orientation in favor of limited government and a free economy but separable from certain variations of contemporary liberalism. The hallmark of this approach is not so much its blurring of the distinctiveness of the Catholic and liberal intellectual traditions but rather its positing of more than one liberal tra-

dition, at least one of which can partially sustain the political and social thought of the Second Vatican Council.

Francis Canavan rejects all three of these readings of the relation between Catholicism and liberalism. For more than thirty years Canavan has argued—perhaps even more clearly and cogently than John Courtney Murray himself—for a different view of this relation. Twenty years before Alasdair MacIntyre asked liberal “anti-perfectionists” to tell us about their (undiscussed) *telos*, and thirty years before Michael Sandel warned of the dangers of the procedural republic, Canavan became one of the most incisive critics of liberal secularism, and its narrow sectarian agenda. Indeed, rather than blurring the differences between the Catholic and liberal intellectual traditions, Canavan highlighted them. Unlike the “neoconservatives,” he has argued that the “retheoretization” (Murray’s term) of American (and Western) constitutionalism is a product not of a deformation of the liberal tradition of politics but rather of a flowering of that tradition’s model of man and society. But unlike the “confessionalists,” Canavan affirms the legitimacy, in principle, of the Catholic human rights revolution in defense of constitutional democracy and religious freedom. This essay will explore Canavan’s understanding of the liberal tradition, his critique of the liberal model of man and society, and, by implication, his effort “to seek a better intellectual and moral foundation for our polity”<sup>6</sup> than that supplied by liberal individualism. In doing so, it will highlight the differences between Canavan’s line of argument and that of the Americanists, the confessionalists, and the neoconservatives.

Francis Canavan’s account of the genesis and development, both philosophically and politically, of the liberal intellectual tradition builds upon the work of John H. Hallowell.<sup>7</sup> Hallowell argued that liberalism emerged in the 17th century as a not altogether unsalutary political movement dedicated to freeing individuals from what were perceived to be the arbitrary and capricious constraints imposed by an “authoritarian” church. In its purely political dimension—a dimension emphasized today by both Americanist and neoconservative Catholics—liberalism became equated with Whiggism or constitutionalism.

For Canavan, however, as for Hallowell, liberalism was never *just* a political movement. Rather than limiting itself to the political task of defending limited constitutional government and some notion of human rights, liberalism attempted to situate its defense of “Whiggism” within a larger metaphysical, epistemological and anthropological worldview. Although this worldview, like its medieval predecessor, was confident about the ability of reason to discover moral truths, it was informed by a revolutionary and distinctively modern epistemology and metaphysics. In so doing, it laid the foundation for its own destruction as a defender of limited constitutional government and human rights. The “integral” (or 17th and 18th century) variant of liberalism, Hallowell argued was based on a concept of individuality that emphasized “the inherent moral worth and spiritual equality of each individual, the dignity of human personality, the autonomy of individual will, and the essential ratio-

nality of men.” Because of the importance integral liberals (such as Locke, Grotius, and Jefferson) attached to the principles of autonomy and rationality, they fused two incompatible elements. The first emphasized the belief that society consists of atomic, autonomous individuals; the second, that there are eternal truths transcending individual desire to which will or desire must be subordinated (115-116).

“The cement that held these two concepts together was conscience, conceived of as each individual’s share of human reason” (116). For as long as this cement held, liberalism succeeded. “Liberalism as a theory of ethics and politics worked as long as it did,” Canavan explains,

because it assumed that rational and decent people would see the difference between moral right and wrong and would for the most part respect it. Liberalism, however, was able to do this because it incorporated into its idea of personal freedom moral norms that it did not create but inherited from the classical and Christian past. (134)

The contrast between Canavan’s analysis of the liberal intellectual tradition and the neoconservative distinction between at least two variants of liberalism begins to emerge. Whereas the neoconservatives applaud the “integral” liberalism of Locke, Grotius, Jefferson, and some others, Canavan indicates that liberalism from its very inception traded upon the moral capital of an intellectual tradition that it had already set about to supplant. In other words, the “virtues” of integral liberalism were a borrowed set of virtues for which liberalism itself could take little credit. Its vices were all its own.

Thus, while Canavan seems to argue that integral liberalism contained two essential, but contradictory principles, it is clear that Canavan believes that only one of these principles is original to liberal thought—the principle of the atomic, autonomous individual, a principle that becomes the dynamic force behind the “development” of the liberal intellectual tradition. Subjectivism, argues Canavan, “is the essence of liberalism” (115). Hence, “the subjectivity of all values . . . is the direction in which the inner dynamism of liberal thought has moved from the beginning” (118). The subjectivism of the dominant strain of contemporary liberalism is not a perversion of “integral” or “classical” liberalism; it is a dynamic realization of all that was original in classical liberalism. Thus Locke, for example, was a defender of natural rights and limited government, not because of his philosophical liberalism but, paradoxically, despite his liberalism. Canavan would agree with Murray’s claim that it was Locke’s own common sense, caution, and allegiance to the British constitutional tradition that prevented him from carrying his own metaphysical and moral principles to their logical conclusion.

What is the source of liberalism’s ultimate defense of the atomic, autonomous individual who knows no laws other than those that have been self-generated? Canavan argues that the liberal conception of reason which “contained within itself the seeds of . . . disintegration from the beginning,” was nominalist

philosophically and hedonistic ethically (116). Classical liberals such as Hobbes and Locke argued that “we never know the real essence of a thing, but only its nominal essence, which is a mental construct that we make up for the sake of convenience in dealing with the world” (118). Reality therefore is comprised not of natural wholes or natural goods that are accessible to human reason. Rather, it is comprised of “individual things that collide with one another to form more or less lasting patterns,” “a world of individual substances, known to us only in the sensations they cause in us” (121).

This epistemology lays the foundation for our perceiving human relationships as “external and voluntary.” The classical and medieval conception of man as a social and political animal who must realize his essential nature in natural groupings such as family, clan, and polity is replaced by “the individual [understood as] an atom, motivated by self-interest, to whom violence is done if he is subjected to a relationship with other humans which he has not chosen” (121). Because the realm of allegedly objective transcendent goods has been hermetically closed to reason, the subjective good of individual preference—conceived in hedonist terms—takes its place as the ultimate foundation for liberal society. In other words, choice becomes *the* human good for liberals not because of some perversion of the liberal tradition by antiperfectionists such as Dworkin and Richards but by virtue of the tradition’s own philosophical atomism and reductionism.

It is liberalism’s “nominalist view of the world,” Canavan contends, which explains “why the idea of a moral law of nature, which still persisted in Hobbes and Locke (in however withered a form) was abandoned and replaced by scientific laws of nature” (119) and a utilitarian approach to morality. And, it is this nominalism which explains the emergence of the contemporary liberal vision of man as a sovereign self, as a sovereign will who must create its own view of the purpose and meaning of human existence.

The liberal intellectual tradition cannot, on its own terms, salvage constitutional democracy. Rather, it can only serve to weaken even further the spiritual, moral, and political forces upon which an experiment in democratic self-government depends. Liberalism’s enervating influence can be proven, Canavan believes, by looking at the effect of liberal neutrality and the efforts of the U. S. Supreme Court to make neutrality our foundational norm.

Contemporary antiperfectionist liberalism (of the variety advocated by figures such as Ronald Dworkin or David A. J. Richards) seeks to gain a rhetorical advantage in its effort to supply foundational principles of justice for a pluralist society by claiming to be neutral on the question of the good life. Whereas integral liberals had attempted to remove divisive questions of religious truth from the public square in the name of tolerance, civil peace, and individual natural rights, contemporary liberals seek to privatize all issues (especially fractious moral ones) about which there seem to be little moral concord. The contemporary liberal state “aims only at equal liberty for all under impartial general laws. The use that men make of their liberty and the goals they pursue are for them to decide” (69).

Some liberals wish to pursue a minimalist *modus vivendi* among persons of diverse moral beliefs; others believe justice demands the treatment of all persons with “equal concern and respect” (à la Dworkin); and still others believe personal autonomy is the highest moral good. Whatever their premises, the goal is “neutrality,” a supposedly objective reference point that transcends the issues that divide us. Dworkin makes this clear when he argues that

government must be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life. . . . Each person follows a more-or-less articulated conception of what gives value to life. . . . Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions, the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception to another, either because the officials believe that one is intrinsically superior, or because one is held by the more numerous or more powerful group.<sup>8</sup>

Whether the justification be civil peace, the demands of equality, or liberty, the result is eerily similar: the reification of the autonomous self through the creation of the neutral state.

Canavan’s critique of the contemporary liberal notion of neutrality predates Sandel’s, and, given Canavan’s arguments regarding the essential nature of the liberal intellectual tradition, points toward the revival of an older tradition of political discourse that can sustain a democratic experiment in self-government. Canavan’s critique is twofold: (1) Its protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, a regime rooted in the vision of contemporary liberal theory is not in fact neutral; and (2) the liberal model of man in society issues not in a regime of limited government but in one of monistic statism.

Liberalism, Canavan argues, presents itself as an alternative to religious and moral orthodoxy, but its inner dynamic forces it to become an alternative orthodoxy that “dissolves the norms” that make for ordered liberty.

Normlessness, however, turns out to be itself a norm. It is a steady choice of individual freedom over any other human or social good that conflicts with it, an unrelenting subordination of all allegedly objective goods to the subjective good of individual preference. Such a policy does not merely set individuals free to shape their own lives. It necessarily sets norms for a whole society, creates an environment in which everyone has to live, and exerts a powerful influence on social institutions. (76)

Under the liberal neutralist dispensation, persons are free to be Orthodox Roman Catholics or Jews, conservative or liberal Protestants, or anything else, but they are not free to make their norms the norms by which others might be required to lead their lives. Religionists who do not subscribe to liberal individualism are asked to bracket their beliefs for the sake of a greater social good: civil peace, equality, or liberty—each term defined, of course, in liberal individualist terms. Pluralism becomes a liberal monism, and this monism soon relies upon the state to enforce the new orthodoxy.

Similarly, Canavan recognizes, as Tocqueville did some 160 years ago, that the liberal project of freeing the individual from unjust social constraints sets up the state itself as the dissolver of social norms. The modern liberal regime, left to its own devices, swings wildly from an abstract defense of the sovereign self to an abstract defense of the will of the people. (Thus, the typically liberal question: How do we balance the rights of the individual against the needs of the state?) But even at its most seemingly anti-statist pole, such as the liberalism of the ACLU, the liberal individualist is quite willing to employ the state to enforce the norm of liberal individualism. “Government today,” writes Canavan, “is obligated to be, at one and the same time, individualistic and statist. It is individualistic when it serves an expanding array of individual rights. But insofar as it uses the power of the state to impose these rights upon institutions, government is statist, and the fingers of the bureaucracy reach more and more into all of the institutions of society” (139).

American constitutionalism has undergone what Murray once described as a retheoretization of foundational principles, and the primary instrument through which this transformation has taken place is the U. S. Supreme Court. As early as 1963, Canavan noted that the new form of pluralism being imposed on the nation through the Court’s individualist reading of the religion clauses of the First Amendment “looks like an old and tired secular monism” (1). Under the rubric of governmental neutrality between religion and non-religion, and in the name of religious liberty, the Court has reduced religion to a *res privata* and charged itself with the formidable task of ensuring that the neutral public square is not threatened by those who would impose their religious values on others. “Liberal individualism prompts [society] to guarantee the citizen’s right to follow his conscience, if he has the will and the means to do so. But monism dictates that there should be only one set of secular, officially neutral public institutions in all fields” (5).

For Canavan, the First Amendment, as devised by its framers, attempted to answer no theological propositions. Its provisions were, as Murray would put it, articles of peace based ultimately on the framers’ principled dedication to limited constitutional government and religious freedom. These articles of peace deterred political monism for the first one hundred fifty years of our republic precisely because it traded upon a moral consensus that was not liberalism’s creation. In the Court’s decisions on church-state relations, the propositions of “liberal individualism” have become *the* foundational norm for constitutional jurisprudence. Freedom of religion—and, indeed, freedom from religion—must be protected because many individuals *choose* to follow religious precepts (or ignore them). The establishment of religion—conceived quite broadly as any governmental endorsement of religiosity—is deemed unconstitutional because religion is a *res privata*. In short, the free exercise clause protects personal autonomy not religious freedom. And the establishment clause provides the playing field on which the autonomous self is guaranteed a friendly set of public institutions in the realm of politics, law, and education.

In 1965 Francis Canavan noted rather pessimistically that “the sound we hear today is the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar of the sea of faith” (13). This sound is only amplified by Catholics who encourage a rapprochement with an intellectual tradition, liberalism, that they either never define clearly, or never recognize as inconsistent in its most fundamental tenets with either Catholicism or a political experiment in ethical, ordered liberty. Canavan’s contribution to the American civil conversation has been to sharpen the distinctiveness of two traditions that are intelligibly at war with each other—the Catholic intellectual tradition with its increasing appreciation of the virtues of limited constitutional government, and the liberal intellectual tradition with its deracination of politics.

Whether the long, withdrawing roar of the sea of faith will be succeeded by the short withdrawing whimper of the liberal tide is unclear, but Francis Canavan has over the past forty years done what he could to assist the latter effort.

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### Notes

1. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, eds., *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
2. Kenneth L. Grasso, “Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, the Free Society, and the Second Vatican Council,” in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy*, eds., Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 44.
3. R. Bruce Douglass, “Introduction” to *Catholicism and Liberalism*, 9-10.
4. J. Leon Hooper, *The Ethics of Discourse: the Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 203.
5. Ernest Fortin, “The Trouble With Catholic Social Thought,” *Boston College Magazine* (Summer 1988): 37-42.
6. Francis Canavan, S.J., *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 115. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.
7. See John H. Hallowell, *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971).
8. Ronald Dworkin, “Liberalism,” in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed., Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 64.