

Liberal Democracy, Spiritual Values and Nihilism: Prefatory Notes to a pending Discussion in the Orthodox World

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Owing to the panic raised by the collapse of past certainties and the sweeping march of pluralism in the Western world, liberal democracy is nowadays increasingly accused, among other things, of undermining established normative principles in the name of a disoriented relativism intolerant of any collective and traditional vision of life. Moreover, according to this view, liberalism is broadly incriminated for inducing atheistic nihilism as well as an open hostility to religion and spirituality. As a result, liberal culture is presented on the whole as intrinsically incompatible with the metaphysical and, by extension, normative claims of monotheistic religions. Meeting the above indictment head-on, we shall argue that not only is liberal democracy not devoid of ethical principles but in actuality constitutes a valuable ally for Christianity, one that is more dignified and trustworthy than neoconservative alternatives of a communitarian bent vying for faith's comradeship.

Politics and Ontology

Arguably one of the most crucial questions currently engaging political theory in the Western world is the legitimacy of the interplay between politics and ontology (as well as eschatology, the teleological horizon of ontology). Stated more elaborately, we believe that the debate on whether politics is entitled to pose ontological questions derived from religious and other transcendental sources is only bound to intensify insofar as politics stands for democracy and the promotion of human rights. This is demonstrated by the cultural wars raging almost everywhere in the Western world nowadays, particularly in the United States. This controversy is fuelled by the perception of metaphysical foundations of morality (and by extension, of policymaking) as inherently incompatible with the fluidity of revisable truths that appear more suitable to

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the struggle towards an evolving, forward-looking, and inclusive society feeding off the modern (Humean and Kantian) “is-ought” distinction.

The debate is not new; it goes back several decades, predating World War II, when pro-Nazi theorists like Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, and before them Oswald Spengler, unleashed a relentless attack against liberal democracy, accusing it of being a cause of decline and disintegration. In their obstinately anti-liberal mindset, the notion of human rights, far from being valued at all, was considered – as it is today in similar circles – pernicious in its social repercussions, the trademark of a self-indulgent, egotistical society centred on the gratification of an individual’s base desires. To be sure, throughout the post-war years and in the wake of such recent atrocities as the Holocaust, the disposition towards human rights improved immensely, at least theoretically. The collective consciousness of Western societies, broadly aided by sensible intellectuals with considerable social influence, started to regard human rights as the most valuable and non-negotiable accomplishment of humankind, inextricably intertwined with the open, civil society and the latter’s constitutionally protected freedoms of conscience and lifestyle. The inherent link between human rights and liberal democracy lies in the realization that the recognition and safeguarding of human rights does not constitute a *fait accompli* but a precipitously fragile process subject to further development – a rather ceaseless project shaped by new knowledge and the growth of social sensibilities allowing for the inclusion of more groups along with their respective needs under the aegis of state protection. Nowadays, however, the unbridled expansion of rights has already begun to appear provocative and even intolerable in some circles, to the extent that the said expansion has challenged and continues to question traditional normative principles in the name of what seems to be an excessive relativism gone awry, leaving little room for inherited social bonds.

Thus, in view of the peril of relativism effecting changes faster than most people could stomach (a worry abetted by the near-global economic crisis attributed to globalization), the championing of liberal causes – including the discourse on human rights – backfired, triggering a reactionary rejoinder on many levels. The reaction ranges from the populist rhetoric of politicians and religious fanatics who often join forces in demonizing liberal pluralism as the main culprit behind every current social ill (be that unemployment, migration or high divorce rates), to the more sophisticated condemnations by conservative thinkers supporting communitarianism. In the latter’s critique, liberalism is accused of an assortment of harms: it is regarded as utterly spineless and nihilistic, detrimental to spirituality and religion, hence responsible for the desacralization of life; it is accused of exalting a blatant indifference to the common good, in effect instigating the deconstruction of society itself

and its perverted transformation into a sum of unrelated, egocentric individuals. More poignantly, perhaps, liberalism is reproached for the obsolescence of politics by dint of the autonomous function of the economy, which allegedly results in a disparaging submission of entire nations to the unaccountable self-interest of the markets. Collectively, the most considered strands of this critique hearken back to Alasdair MacIntyre's urges to the Western world to regain the notion of some form of (neo-)Aristotelian eschatology, which was fatally deconstructed by Nietzsche, as an antidote to the moral relativism that undermines communal thinking and hence the notion of solidarity. The same critique is abundant in the fascinating studies of Michael Sandel, for whom certain goods, values and norms are fundamentally incompatible with those we associate with markets.

Permit me to add a few words on Alasdair MacIntyre's contribution to the revitalization of the Aristotelian notion of the "common Good" from a communitarian standpoint. MacIntyre stands as a watershed in contemporary moral theory, and his work is considered to be of the same calibre as the philosophical output of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, i.e., sufficiently thought-provoking and original so as to generate a new venue for ethics and moral reflection. But unlike these thinkers, he has sought to revive the long disdained philosophical strand of "virtue ethics" that lost ground to the "procedural" kind of moral discourse that has mainly dominated the field till this day. In that sense, MacIntyre has been a contrarian to the modern spirit of moral iconoclasm, which (by his own account) began as early as the Renaissance. At this point, Renaissance philosophy broke free from the teleology of Aristotelian physics, only to gradually extend the rejection of that particular aspect of Aristotelianism to the realm of ethics as well – in reaction to the medieval religious worldview known for its perhaps intemperate and problematic (by many accounts) assimilation of Aristotelian metaphysics into Christian theology. Consequently, as MacIntyre would have it, the denunciation of teleological ethics, particularly in its religious apparel, was picked up and further worked out by the Enlightenment,¹ and was to be given its final, decisive blow

1 MacIntyre's disdain for the Enlightenment philosophers is starkly evident as early as his book *A Short History of Ethics*, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 183: "We can bring out Rousseau's importance best by considering the different attitude to liberty taken by the typical writers of the Enlightenment and by Rousseau. For Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Helvétius alike the ideals of political liberty are incarnated in the English Revolution of 1688. Freedom means freedom for Whig lords and also for intellectuals like themselves. But for those whom Voltaire called 'the rabble' obedience is still the order of the day. Thus on the only point on which the writers of the Enlightenment were predisposed to be moral innovators they adopted a position which was essentially arbitrary,

in the fuming prose of Nietzsche. In MacIntyre's assessment, this replacement could only have led, disastrously enough, to the advancement of a gross individualism, of the kind that Nietzsche would eventually hail in his startlingly frank celebration of the "will to power": this is the inevitable outcome of post-platonic, post-Aristotelian and post-Christian ethics, according to MacIntyre. (Incidentally, in upholding this view, MacIntyre is the exact antithesis of the popular moralist Ayn Rand, who glorified Nietzsche and vilified Plato in her promotion of what appears to the present writer as an overblown individualistic ethos that lent support to aggressive capitalism.)

In his classic study *After Virtue*², MacIntyre offers a prolonged critique of Nietzsche, to the point of ending the book by presenting readers with the stern dilemma "Nietzsche or Aristotle?"³ In his view, Nietzsche represents everything that is morally reprehensible in the modern history of ideas. But more than simply pinpointing the "beast," MacIntyre is particularly interested in tracing the true intellectual culprit responsible for the progressive arrival to the Nietzschean ideal of the "Overman." Thus, in his search for the doctrines that he believes laid the groundwork for the nihilism so shamelessly exalted in works such as *The Antichrist*, MacIntyre blames the modern "is-ought" dichotomy,⁴ as was particularly promulgated by David Hume, and before him (as MacIntyre would have it) by Blaise Pascal. Therein lies, in his view, the philosophical trick most instrumental in occasioning the fundamental turning point away from the Aristotelian disparity between man as he is (the actual, *unrealized* human being) and "man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos."⁵ Beyond Hume, MacIntyre attributes this split to the "mechanics of action" (as he calls it) mentality of the Enlightenment, thanks to which ethics was re-shaped in accordance with the mechanistic and individualistic empiricism that gradually replaced Aristotelian teleology.⁶

which accepted the status quo as a whole, while questioning it in part, especially where it affected their own interests. No wonder that these would-be radicals so eagerly sought and accepted relationships with royal patrons, Diderot with Catherine of Russia, Voltaire with Frederick of Prussia." On the whole, MacIntyre seems to prefer, if critically, the pessimism of a Schopenhauer as "an important corrective to the easy liberal optimism of so much of nineteenth-century life" (222).

2 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 3rd ed. (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007).

3 MacIntyre, "Nietzsche or Aristotle: Trotsky and St. Benedict," in *After Virtue*, 256ff. The question "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" was first posed in the ninth chapter of the same book.

4 See MacIntyre, "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail," in *After Virtue*, 51–61.

5 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54.

6 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 80–81.

In the field of Greek Orthodox theology, Christos Yannaras is well known for his continuous elegy about the suicidal retreat and eventual loss of politics structured “according to truth.” Pursuant to the Yannaras’ philosophical requirements, the very notion of citizenship should be shaped by a “deep” ontology inspired by what is sacred and not along the arbitrary lines of a conventional discourse about “rights,” a discourse often driven by the markets. In fact, Yannaras, author of *The Inhumanity of Rights*⁷, a monograph emblematic of his reactionary agenda, goes so far as to claim that the communitarian ideal of Orthodoxy is the only efficient bulwark against the neoliberal globalization that levels all cultural differences under the guise of progress and individual freedoms and thus subjugates human life and its needs to the private interests of a greedy elite. Worth mentioning here is an interesting philosophical shift that occurred near the end of the 20th century, concerning a joint condemnation of the individualistic character of liberalism by Christians and Marxists alike, former intellectual adversaries currently turned into part-time allies:⁸ in their eyes, liberalism is nothing but an ideology of political egoism, insofar as it ignores the social predisposition of people and the relationality that forges human subjectivity, as well as the clash of interests that separates the classes. Thus, in light of liberalism’s heightened predilection for private property and its endorsement of social inequality as a natural phenomenon, critics bemoan that the moral and political values of solidarity and hospitality are alien to liberal principles.⁹ For these and similar reasons, the disaffection with liberalism is now common to a wide range of left-wing and Christian scholars committed to communitarian ideals, secular and/or religious alike. Their common resentment is also visible in the congruence between the “right-wing” invocation of national identity as a paragon of togetherness and the “left-wing” litany condemning individuality, neatly summed up in the Marxist slogan: “The Left is the struggle of the collective ‘us’ versus the ‘ego’s’ instincts.”

A common denominator of the above criticisms is their conclusion that liberal democracy suffers from an existential poverty of the sort that leaves people

7 Christos Yannaras, *Ἡ ἀπανθρωπία τοῦ δικαιώματος* [The Inhumanity of Right] (Athens: Domos Publications, 2006).

8 Literary theorist Terry Eagleton is a noteworthy example of this trend as an outspoken defender of both Marxism and Christianity. See especially Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven CN: Yale University Press, 2010); idem, *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven CN: Yale University Press, 2018). Slavoj Žižek is another major representative of this trend. Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse core of Christianity* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2003).

9 Philippos Vasiloyannis, *Τὸ μίσος γιὰ τὴ φιλελεύθερη δημοκρατία* [The Hatred of Liberal Democracy] (Athens: Eurasia Publications, 2019), 94.

spiritually destitute, deprived of values and afflicted by the worst form of loneliness: the lack of a comprehensive profound answer to the meaning of life. The fact that human beings are predominantly not content with mere survival but aspire rather to know why they exist in the first place, thereby in search of a deeper purpose in life, often leads them to religion (for, after all, humans are *theopoietic* or god-making creatures as well). Alternatively, they are given to the lure of utopias as a refuge from life's nagging uncertainties. Conservative intellectuals increasingly underscore the significance of existential meaning as an indispensable requirement for a fulfilling life, which is why they flaunt the fear of "nihilism" and "depression" affecting northwestern societies in support of their communal or even nationalistic rhetoric. In doing so, however, they make an unfair demand of politics, asking from it what is alien to its nature – sanguinely disregarding or concealing the fact that whenever metaphysics of any sort is forcefully mixed with politics, the result is disastrous, as has become painfully evident in the various totalitarianisms that bedeviled the previous century.

Nevertheless, while the ghost of totalitarianism haunts progressive historians and intellectuals, it is invisible to the average person who is left acutely frustrated when stripped of familiar, domesticated coordinates. Quite evidently, people deeply resent the resulting emptiness that follows the ebb of the "great narratives" serving as purveyors of a fixed grand meaning; they find the ensuing reign of a "confusing" pluralism that only grounds us in prosaic, "small scale" life goals just as unnerving – particularly when such minimalism is combined with the uncertainty of a fluid and constantly changing world such as ours. As a result, the demand for a spiritual port providing a meaning that supersedes daily turmoil and the vacuity of consumerism is recurrently on the rise – usually in the form of an instinctive regression of societies to a conservative mindset often manifested in the electoral support of populist demagogues (merchants of political messianism) backed by similar trends in philosophy and art.

This "black hole" allegedly ailing contemporary life is habitually associated with Western civilization as its unmistakable malaise after the advent of modernity, with liberal democracy being designated as the main culprit for the said dead-end. It is worth mentioning that Yannaras refers scornfully to liberal democracy as "the right-wing pole of historical materialism," a witticism intended to depict liberalism as the worldly, lewd flipside to Marxism. Philosophical and literary adversaries of modernity and the liberal versions of the social contract articulate their consternation by asking a series of reasonable, if exaggerated, questions, occasionally bordering on emotionalism: "Can the 20th century mass society with its technological development provide a

satisfactory meaning for life to ordinary people? God is dead, the ancient regime is also past us, but what succeeds them? At the end of the day, is the human race really receptive to improvement? Did modernism live up to its promise to instill liberation or has it delivered nothing but a void?" Intellectuals nostalgic for the "lost pre-modern centre" mockingly conclude that "the 20th century did not provide us with optimistic answers to these questions, even though in theory it should have been the era of the triumph of the Enlightenment's." The Czech philosopher Karel Kosík, for one, was unflinchingly caustic in his uncharitable judgment of modern liberal culture. He faults it for comprising the realm of the "accidental" and the "meaningless," which recklessly erased every trace of tragedy from the human radar, blithely surrendering the modern conscience to the dictatorship of the markets without resistance.¹⁰ He ascertained that

humans nowadays are hasty and anxious. They rush from one place to another, stripped of any sense of real direction [...]. The essential meaning in human life is now long lost, having been replaced by the pursuit of the non-essential. The philosophical formula encapsulating the immersion in what is downright meaningless is the phrase 'God is dead.' [...] Having thoughtlessly glorified the trivial, people find a purpose in life in the accumulation of products, in property and the unlimited consumption of things, goods, pleasures and information [...]. Production has become the predominant means of shaping how humans relate to the world: production has absorbed creativity and initiative [...]. [Kosík concludes, adding ruefully that] "the modern age is a time of crisis, because its foundations are in crisis."¹¹

In a similar vein, the unsung anatomist of totalitarianism, Costas Papaioannou, one of the first to discern the roots of Soviet dictatorship in the gaps of Marxist theory, uttered a verdict reminiscent of the rhetoric spouted by such anti-liberal theorists as McIntyre, Yannaras and Kosík. As Papaioannou argues in his study *The Birth of Totalitarianism*:

10 Liberal democracy does not assume it should be shielded from criticism, if anything, thanks to its open-ended, dialogical nature. Thus, it can converse with and learn from serious conservative critics such as Michael Oakeshott. For a condensed exposition of his conservatism, see Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962). For a more recent challenging critique of liberal democracy akin to Kosík's negative appraisal of it (minus the latter's emphasis on the so-called "existential meaninglessness" supposedly intrinsic to liberal culture), see Adrian Pabst, *The Demons of Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2019).

11 Karel Kosík, *Η κρίση της Νεωτερικότητας* [The Crisis of Modernity] (Athens: Psychogios Publications, 2003), 72–4.

Nietzsche denounces the century that killed God and is unwilling to understand the broader consequences of the replacement of God by various abstract ideas: Progress, Ethics, Democracy, Socialism, Nationalism, Rationalism and other resounding concepts bound to collapse under the crashing wave of the coming Nihilism. The more optimistic and reassuring these false gods appear to be, the more humans are convinced of their self-sufficiency. But they will be stripped just as quickly of all that is meaningful and essential; and the erosive work of Nihilism that nullifies the foundations of existence will be all the easier. The bond of humankind with its own life will be even more troubling and the inversion of values will be more effective, transforming human spirituality into a problem.¹²

Liberalism and Ethics

In light of the above accusations, the equation of liberal democracy with nihilism, individualism and the self-negation of politics in general would seem to be self-evident. This equation is overwhelmingly popular among theological circles, especially in Greek Orthodoxy, where the cultural model of Christian Hellenism is touted as a unique purveyor of universal existential meaning. The alluring promise of this cultural paradigm, however, is marred by a resentful elegy for the past, a craving for the lost glamour of a once imperial, flourishing Orthodoxy, which presently lies in hopeless decline. How so? Because (so the story goes) Orthodox culture was foolishly exchanged for (deleterious!) foreign, Western socio-political models and customs, unreflectively imitated by modern Greeks unappreciative of the value of their own tradition. Yannaras, the premier representative of this antimodern trend, sums up its reactionary core neatly when he states that:

the co-inherence of ecclesiastical and state power was possible in Byzantium, in the context of a culture opposed to the modern one, when the goals of secular power were to organize a state mirroring the celestial hierarchy [in contrast to the current type of nation state that] has as its sole goal the debauchery of its citizens.¹³

The lament for the loss of the socio-political primacy of Christianity and the monopoly of Christian values in Western society is often portrayed as a devious

12 Costas Papaioannou, *Η γένεση του ολοκληρωτισμού. Οικονομική υπανάπτυξη και κοινωνική επανάσταση* [The Birth of Totalitarianism: Economical Underdevelopment and Social Revolution] (Athens: Enallaktikes Publications, 1991).

13 Christos Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικής Θεολογίας* [Chapters of Political Theology], 2nd ed. (Athens: Gregoris Publications, 1983), 166–7.

persecution of faith, as an exile of the sacred from the public sphere, all thanks to the malevolent anti-religious prejudice of liberalism. For example, in the same collection of essays penned by Yannaras, we are told bluntly – without further analysis and substantiation – that “the notion of social and political ‘Liberalism’, as formed in Western Europe by the so-called ‘progressive’ movements of past centuries, sternly presupposes an open opposition to the clergy and institutional Christendom.”¹⁴ Is this assessment valid? Definitely not. To begin with, we should be reminded that liberal democracy is intrinsically secular, not atheistic. The difference between freedom of and from religion on the one hand and atheism on the other is vast and fundamental to any attempt at discussing liberal democracy’s stance on faith responsibly. It must therefore be thoroughly delineated because it is frequently obscured, often due to ignorance but occasionally also deliberately. Liberals include in their ranks people of all metaphysical beliefs, from agnostics and the religiously indifferent to believers and atheists.¹⁵ Monumental figures in European history such as Hugo Grotius, Pierre Bayle, Johannes Althusius, the Jesuit theologian Balthasar Gracián and the empiricist John Locke could be listed, among others, as practicing Christians and liberals. Liberal democracy does not engage in debates on religious doctrines, meaning it abstains from adjudicating their reasonableness, plausibility or worth, unless doctrines are deemed detrimental to the freedom and security of citizens. We are indebted to John Rawls, the father of modern political liberalism, for the crucial reminder that the model of the social contract he favours, leaves religious beliefs completely untouched, if not respectfully insular from scientific or philosophical criticism.¹⁶ Rawls does not embrace any philosophical or ideological worldview,

14 Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικής Θεολογίας*, 79.

15 Instances of enlightened theological affirmation of religious liberty, medieval as well as modern, are discussed in Brian Tierney, “Religious Rights: A Historical Perspective,” in *Religious Liberty in Western Thought*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion, ed. Noel B. Reynolds and W. Cole Durham, Jr. (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 29–57.

16 As a person of faith (a practicing Orthodox Christian) and a liberal, I was drawn to Rawls’ later work because unlike alternative forms of liberalism, such as Richard Rorty’s, for one, his version refrains from assailing religion or from likewise setting up Enlightenment secularism as an indispensable prerequisite for democracy. It thus strikes a much-needed balance between the private and the public domains, instilling as it does a neutrality that is valuable in all agendas, like my own, aiming to de-politicize faith and de-theologize politics. See John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (Summer 1997), 766: “Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity.” To further clarify his point, Rawls also adds that “we must distinguish public reason from what is sometimes referred to as secular reason and secular values

such as the Enlightenment, for example, as more suitable for democracy in the present era. Moreover, according to Rawls, even atheism falls into the category of metaphysical or “comprehensive doctrines,” inasmuch as it constitutes an all-inclusive worldview not corroborated by science. As such, it is considered unsuitable for invocation in public debates from the liberal angle in much the same way that religious doctrines *per se* are excluded.¹⁷

But whence their exclusion? At this point, a further clarification is in order: theists, agnostics and atheists should be equally entitled to join debates on any matter of public interest, with the sole provision that they express their views in the idiom of public reason, agreed upon in advance by every interlocutor. Such an idiom is, by definition, as metaphysically neutral as possible: argumentation so structured may contain scientific facts, statistics, references to historical precedents, as well as reasonably expected results and reliable data subject to scientific checks and falsifiability. Given this requirement, standpoints that are based on religious traditions and doctrines, including atheism, clearly cannot be endorsed as appropriate for deliberating public affairs – not only by virtue of their divisive nature but chiefly because the metaphysical justification of any view does not constitute a genuine form of argumentation; it is but a mere tautology, a question-begging reference unable to contribute anything substantial to the debate beyond simply indicating partisan preference. For example, quoting the Qur’an or the New Testament cannot demonstrate in a rational way (as befits the ancient Greek tradition of *λόγον διδόναι* or being accountable to reason for one’s statements) the intrinsic uncleanness of eating pork or the wrongness of blood transfusions as advocated by Jehovah’s Witnesses. To be sure, the whole issue of determining the criteria demarcating legitimate from illegitimate argumentation in public debates as regards the social contract is deep and much too complicated to be analyzed here in any meaningful length. Suffice it to point out then, given my space restrictions, that liberal democracy is fully and sincerely respectful of everyone’s religious and/or ideological beliefs without discriminating in favour of any party. At the

[since] these are not the same as public reason. For I define secular reason [itself] as reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines. Such doctrines and values are much too broad to serve the purposes of public reason. [...] Moral doctrines are on a level with religion and first philosophy. By contrast, liberal political principles and values, although intrinsically moral values, are specified by liberal *political* conceptions of justice and fall under the category of the political” (775–6). The above thesis is integral to Rawls’ later magisterial work, see his *Political Liberalism, with a New Introduction and a Reply to Habermas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

17 Rawls famously insisted that “to deny certain metaphysical doctrines is to assert another such doctrine.” See *Political Liberalism*, 379, n. 8.

same time, however, it raises limits aiming to forestall the hijacking of public debates by fundamentalist, partisan and similar defective forms of circular reasoning. In doing so, liberal democracy categorically assumes that in free, non-theocratic or other non-totalitarian societies, policymaking occurs by consensus attained through compromise than it does by submission to revealed truths – whether divinely dictated or imposed by the so-called iron laws of history. In fact, the neutrality upheld by liberal democracy with regard to metaphysics, secular or religious alike, is precisely what safeguards everyone's rights to either worship (privately or in public) or abstain completely from any kind of worship without suffering persecution. Interestingly, the impartiality of Rawlsian liberalism runs counter to the "paternalistic" version of autonomy maintained by Cornelius Castoriadis,¹⁸ who set atheism as a *sine qua non* prerequisite for the success of democracy.

For all its neutrality versus doctrine, though, liberal democracy is not morally spineless, nor does it lack sufficient spiritual coordinates. Much less does it promote a kind of morbid individualism devoid of social empathy,¹⁹ as is so irresponsibly claimed. On the contrary, liberal democracy is motivated by high ethical principles. As was alluded above, it values tolerance, rational and sober argumentation, respectful disagreement, innovation, and above all the twin freedoms of conscience and thought. These are some of the key virtues

18 Some of Castoriadis' major works available in English include Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998); *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); *Figures of the Thinkable*, ed. Werner Hamacher, trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007); *A Society Adrift: Interviews and Debates, 1947–1997*, trans. Helen Arnold (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); *Democracy and Relativism: A Debate*, trans. John V. Garner (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019); *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997); *Political and Social Writings, 1946–1955: From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*, ed. & trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis & London, The University of Minnesota Press, 1988); *Political and Social Writings*, vol. II, 1955–1960, trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis & London, The University of Minnesota Press, 1988); *Political and Social Writings: 1961–1979: Recommencing the Revolution: From Socialism to the Autonomous Society*, vol. III, trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis & London, The University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

19 For a communitarian, albeit non-reactionary, critical comment on economic liberalism, see Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012). Sandel's egalitarian thesis is powerfully argued. Egalitarianism, however, is not absent from liberalism, especially in its American version, as has been convincingly demonstrated by, among others, Alan Gewirth in *The Community of Rights* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Adam Gopnik in *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

comprising the value system of liberalism, widely appreciated as a major cornerstone of Western culture: an expanded update of the classical Greek concepts of *παρρησία* and *ισηγορία* (freedom of speech), along with the paramount freedom of choosing one's own lifestyle, without fear or the required approval of any clergyman, government or monarch. These values are perfectly compatible with religious faith and especially with Orthodoxy, insofar as its head, Jesus Christ, famously redefined faith and virtuous living as a matter of conscience, namely as the fruit of a free and responsible choice, apart from any coercion.

Speaking of responsibility as it applies to every walk of life, we cannot afford to omit its inextricable intertwinement with individuality, a concept so badly misunderstood in communitarian circles as to be regarded as coextensive with selfishness. To set the record straight on this, we should be reminded that any developed, mature state offers the maximum number of choices to its citizens, expecting them in return to assume their share of civic responsibilities precisely as individuals and not as collectivities. For our part, as Orthodox Christians, we need not shy away from the term "individual" because we have long been accustomed to juxtaposing it with "person," a theologically keener concept sanctified as a relational, selfless entity. Personhood, even when envisaged in terms of uttermost relationality, is unthinkable apart from individual distinctiveness and otherness. As Markos Dragoumis, an unsung Greek liberal, perceptively pointed out:

the primacy of the individual has often been the subject of insults and humiliation by the worshipers of collectivities, who look down upon it as a disdainful way of life. [...] Remnants of this contempt can be traced in some Greek intellectuals who [...] accuse the individual of being indifferent to noble and elevated ideals, such as revolution, social change, the right faith, the arts, the glory of the motherland, and nowadays the clean environment. [...] [T]his feared primacy of the individual, however, does not mean that collectivism is an illusion or that coexistence by itself is problematic, as some other philosophers have maintained. It merely means that the individual bears sole responsibility for her relations with others and that any collective body depends for its existence on the free will of the individuals consenting to its formation; that it exists, in other words, for as long as these individuals persist in their choice. [...] No one can be a collective product. [...] The party does not "generate" people. People are those who generate, constitute and form it. If they change their mind, the party ceases to exist, it dissolves and becomes an event of the past. [...] Liberalism fosters the humanist tendency – a tendency born in Greek antiquity – [to question the givens of life]: instead of resting content with merely asking "why" about whatever already exists, liberalism asks "why not" about something new that can be imagined. Reason aside, as humans we could not have outgrown the sovereignty of instincts without the gift of imagination, an overflowing of the soul permitting us to cut off the ropes and let our life vessel sail out to the open sea. On the opposite end of this innovative curiosity are the frantic worshipers of

prescribed “ends” and ultimate goals, the lovers of censorship bent on uprooting or stigmatizing dissenters as “selfish.” Liberalism does not prescribe policies. It is content with securing the freedoms of thought, speech, religious worship, the press, communication and suffrage for everyone. Citizens dwelling in liberal states enjoy the rights to life, dignity, self-determination, equal treatment by the authorities, free speech, equality before the law and of course the right to private ownership. These principles do not by themselves establish a systematic ethics, but they can nonetheless shed some light on human actions.”²⁰

Liberal democracy certainly respects majority rulings when these are freely administered. At the same time, however, it strives to protect minorities from the tyranny and impunity of the majorities, for, as the historical record demonstrates, the masses are never keen on willingly granting freedoms or privileges to helpless minorities, notwithstanding the former’s self-exonerating rhetoric. One need only cite the tribulations of Frangoyannou, the literary heroine from A. Papadiamantis’ novel *The Murderess*, and the near stoning of the adulteress in the New Testament as atrocities enacted by the pious, yet inhuman, will of the majority. Given the perpetuating tyranny of majorities, then, what line of defense could be mounted against it? Perhaps the most potent theoretical weapon in that direction comes from John Stuart Mill, whose argument is in line with the unequivocal Christian (as well as Kantian) emphasis on *the distinction and dignity of persons*. Mill submits that governments must indeed heed the “will of the people” yet warns vehemently against its unrestricted glorification. Mill was among the first to perceive that, because masses feel immune from trouble, they are often so set in their ways as to become insensitive to the plight of the unprivileged – worse still, they are even likely to desire the oppression of voiceless members of society, given the chance. A major insight of modern political thought is that power corrupts both leaders and citizens when left unchecked, meaning if it is not curtailed by constitutional provisions drawn up for the protection of the weak and marginalized. For these reasons, Mill insisted, the “tyranny of the majority” must now be included among the evils against which society must be on guard.²¹ Christians, more than others, should feel especially motivated to stand in support of vulnerable and marginalized people, assuming, of course, that they are determined to follow in the steps of Christ and not the self-righteous Pharisees – the religious leaders whose legalism incited the stoning of certain women.

20 Markos Dragoumis, *Πορεία προς τὸ φιλελευθερισμὸ* [Path to Liberalism] (Athens: Fileleftheros Typos Publications), 106–8.

21 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Bromwich & George Kateb (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 74–5.

Further arguments along similar lines could be added in support of liberal democracy's worth. Yet, for all their reasonableness, such contentions could be challenged by a set of objections that, at first glance, might seem to cast serious doubts on the proposed compatibility of liberalism with mainstream Christianity. Let us consider some of those. For one thing, as a worldview entailing metaphysical as well as normative premises, Christianity aspires to provide an all-encompassing narrative based on truth claims as opposed to subjective opinions. In view, then, of the ontological constitution of Christian doctrines, whose existential vigor once contributed to the creation of Western culture (along with Greek and Enlightenment ideals), would it really be a good choice to trade in their time-honored guidelines for a shallow and sometimes vulgar pluralism and fluid version of truth? Moreover, did Christianity initially not emerge, at least partially, as a collective ethic advocating the transcendence of individualism? Is the Church not primarily a community, whose Eucharistic celebration unites partakers so strongly as to mystically transform them into a single body, the Body of Christ, in sharp contrast to individualistic modes of praying alone from home, with Bible in hand? Finally, if (as liberals maintain) human rights are considered inalienable as opposed to merely "bestowed" on citizens, thus irrevocable by the whims of authority, would they not be better shielded within an ontological framework rather than seen as mere convention and a matter of contract? In response to this tempting task, theologians could invoke the neo-Patristic notion of personhood as a valuable tool for safeguarding the dignity of persons as ends in themselves, made in the image of God. If so, however, are we not led back to metaphysics as a guide to morals all over again, placing politics on a transcendent pedestal?

Demur of this sort is definitely reasonable, legitimate and indeed deserving of reply, although an extensive discussion of it would take us too far afield. Given our space restrictions, we can only submit some rough thoughts in response.

In the first place, the notion of "culture," so precious to hard-line communitarians and neo-Orthodox Christians alike, is not reducible to a purveyor of existential meaning that surpasses materialism and the mundane affairs of daily life. Adherents of the "cultural" version of faith have long sold a lopsided picture of Christianity as primarily inhibitive of nihilism, hence as a culture-creating bulwark of meaning promoting social cohesion. While this is true, "culture" or civilized living is a far richer signified than is denoted by the banal definition of it as a socially embodied sense of direction structured along the lines of Byzantine Christianity. A sane view of culture means prosperity, not only in terms of material comfort but particularly in the broader sense of a constitutionally guaranteed peaceful coexistence of people of different colour,

race, ethnic origin, education, and sexual orientation espousing diverse, even contrasting beliefs. The importance of this requirement cannot be overstated, given the flagrant historical failure of organized religion (including Orthodox Christianity) to restrain themselves from violence against “others.” A healthy model of culture is one that respects people’s life options and preferences (to the extent that these are not harmful to others), and not only permits but actively encourages the pursuance of one’s dreams, even when it runs counter to the tastes of social majorities – in essence, allowing for the unimpeded possibility of citizens’ self-realization as they see fit for themselves. “Culture” (unless the term refers to mere folklore) means the actual transition from the category of *subject* to that of *citizen*. The shift denotes the liberation of individuals and societies from the fear of an arbitrary authority (whether secular or religious) set on monopolizing and preemptively determining the meaning and content of the “public good” on behalf of its subjects. Lastly, “civilization,” in its advanced stage, is synonymous with the enrichment of human life through its exposure to a wealth of different cultural affairs, as in the case of 5th-century BC Athens, where citizens gained immensely from the free exercise of an incredible variety of sophisticated events, schools and ideas – a myriad of life perspectives, whose combined interplay caused the city to shine through as “the education center of Greece.” In contrast, intellectual atrophy – partial or total – is the proven outcome of the monopoly of public space by a single faith or ideology.

As stated in *Pericles’s Funeral Oration*, moreover, civilization is the recognition of the citizens’ right to privacy, one of the most sacred and inviolable principles of democracy and one of the first freedoms to suffer prohibition in theocratic or otherwise totalitarian regimes. Finally, civilization is synonymous with the smooth operation of democratic institutions, which are the first and the last refuge of the weak. The liberal democratic state, whose forerunner was the Athenian Republic, respects and protects religion, unlike ignorant pseudo-liberals who naively and pretentiously attach political value to their aversion to religion. At the same time, though, liberal democracy is equally protective of individuals from religion, ensuring that its doctrines and principles are never enforced on citizens. On the whole, liberal democracy is astutely aware of its definite limits, which is why it refrains from providing “existential” or other similar psychotherapeutic “visions” to citizens – the freedom it upholds and strives towards is always a *political* freedom, not a *soteriological* one imbued with metaphysical and/or ascetical undertones. The disparity between these two versions of freedom cannot be overstated. Christ has given us an inspiring blueprint for exercising freedom from self-centredness, but it is not the state’s role to make us pious or virtuous people, just good citizens, inasmuch as its

role is regulatory, not soul-saving: democracy seeks to salvage freedoms and rights, alongside setting up civic obligations. At the end of the day, as history dramatically demonstrates, the safeguarding of human rights is certainly more ensured when it arises from the free consent of rational subjects rather than from “revealed truths.”

It is doubtlessly pleasing for all open-minded theologians that Orthodox Christianity is in possession of the aforementioned valuable tool known as the neo-Patristic concept of the person.²² If properly applied in Church life, the notion could prove an excellent theological ally to any social struggle demanding justice and equality before the law for all people. Unfortunately, however, institutional Christianity generally recognizes only those rights that do not oppose its narrow (and permanently fixed) normative principles. As a result of its selective sensitivities, the Church is not only indifferent to the plight of groups of people socially viewed as disreputable, but even sides against them, often counter to all reason and reality. This sad truth has been earnestly pointed out by Professor Ioannis Petrou in his study on multiculturalism and human rights. “Usually, when religions are the majority in any given society,” Petrou says, “they could not care less about minorities; instead, they seek to impose their will on everyone, claiming it is for their own good. On the contrary, when they are in the minority, they stoutly demand the implementation of human rights and religious freedom”²³ – obviously in pursuance of their own protection and interests. As for the theologically nuanced term “personhood” in particular, Petrou is quick to deconstruct its boastful but cheap mention in what are at bottom ultraconservative neo-Orthodox circles. As he postulates, insofar as the Church likes to accentuate the notion of the person, it must uphold it consistently, in a manner encompassing every dimension of human freedom. Personhood, so defined, is intrinsically incompatible with stifling, oppressive power structures. In view of its very nature, the concept of the person does not fit in with abusive authority but with such ends as responsibility, freedom,

22 The role of the Christian concept of personhood as a partial but significant contributor to the emergence of modern subjectivity and human rights, along with the achievements of modernity and secularism, has been acknowledged, among other scholars, by Larry Siedentop, see Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2014); Maureen P. Heath, *The Christian Roots of Individualism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). For a well-argued attempt to build an honest, meaningful bridge between liberal democracy and Orthodox Christianity, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

23 Ioannis Petrou, *Πολυπολιτισμικότητα και θρησκευτική ελευθερία* [Multiculturalism and Religious Freedom] (Thessaloniki: Paratiritis Publications, 2003), 151.

uninhibited participation and inclusion, open processes, and dignified forms of relatedness.²⁴

To understand how liberals and democratically minded theologians view social coexistence, we could benefit from an analogy brought to our attention by Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas. Inspired by the Christology of Chalcedon, Zizioulas reminds us that, in the Church, and by extension society, we are called to coexist *indivisibly* and yet *unconfusedly*. This formula combines unity in diversity, in the sense of applauding the vision of a common life, while also championing otherness as a fundamental component of the person. The ecclesiastical venue par excellence for enacting this balanced blueprint is the Eucharistic setting, whose celebration generates unity while always upholding the distinctiveness of persons. At a socio-political level, on the other hand, liberalism counterbalances oppressive modes of unity more successfully than alternative political models do, by consistently implementing in its vision the above two adverbs “indivisibly” and “unconfusedly” as crucial to the open, forward-looking society – in effect protecting the freedoms of thought, conscience, appearance and behaviour against the perils of ostracism and persecution.

To uphold these freedoms, however, one must first be willing to cast a detached, critical look at cultural traditions and inherited beliefs, instead of passively endorsing them as flawlessly sacrosanct – not necessarily with a view towards tarnishing or undoing them, but for the sake of breaking the chains of habit and blind reverence that hide their latent injustice from our view. After all, to begin with:

if our only possibility for meaningful existence lies in reclaiming pre-Enlightenment (medieval or ancient) cosmologies [and worldviews], as some thinkers seem to suggest, do we have any resources for meaningfully criticizing oppressive social regimes like those that ruled the roost in the Middle Ages? [...] [The need for such a critical mechanism becomes acutely apparent when taking into account that] these histories and traditions are not the monolithic apparatuses that communitarians and radical-orthodox thinkers are wont to claim.²⁵

Christians are not relativists and cannot modify their core doctrine of God without giving up on the Gospel altogether. But as the relatively recent rediscovery of Christian eschatology indicates, history, from the biblical perspective

²⁴ Petrou, *Πολυπολιτισμικότητα*, 75.

²⁵ John Wall, William Schweiker and W. David Wall, “Introduction: Human Capability and Contemporary Moral Thought,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, ed. John Wall, William Schweiker and W. David Hall (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

at least, is not deterministic and its future course is open-ended, entailing many surprising – even stunning – reversals of what is nowadays considered or has been thought of as natural and acceptable. This is true not as a result of capitulating to transient secular fashions and ideologies but because it is the business of the Holy Spirit to refresh history and the physical cosmos by creating new social and biological realities, as He guides the Church's vessel to the Kingdom's shore, to the *eschata*. The Church is still on the way to God's Kingdom, and so it is still in the process of formation – still open (ideally speaking) to new and unanticipated forms of grace that may currently offend our moral, social and cultural standards, even those favoured by the institutional churches. The theological implications of linking pneumatology so intimately with eschatology are staggering and far-reaching as their combination leaves plenty of room for bold reconsideration and progress with regard to anthropology and cosmology. If this sounds surprising, it is because we tend to forget that the biblical God is always ahead of us and does not seek our permission to upset the established order, including its ecclesiastical counterpart. The sharp iconoclasm of the Old Testament prophets, who vehemently challenged the religious establishment of their days, is a good witness to that, as is the breaking of nearly every sacred social and religious taboo by Christ in his earthly ministry. The upshot of these remarks is that Christians, while drawing from a cumulative tradition, must be future-oriented, looking towards the eschaton. This means that they must learn anew to open themselves up to the continuous enrichment and the new forms of grace created by the Holy Spirit who “blows where He wills” (John 3:8), unrestrained by our ethnic, racial, cultural and social prejudices or narrow-mindedness. As Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis beautifully remarks:

Christians do not worship the past, because they are turned toward the future, the *eschaton*, from which they await the fulfilment of their existence. This, however, is not a denial of the present, because the eschaton does not destroy but rather transforms history, turning it into eschatological history and imbuing it with meaning and purpose (cf. Heb. 13:14: For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come).

All of this dictates an attitude of anticipation and expectation, a tension between the “already” and the “not yet,” between the first and second comings of Christ: the anticipated general resurrection is not simply about a return to a Platonic protology or the reclamation of an original, ideal state but a new creative act of God, a complete and comprehensive renewal of all creation. Thus, the fullness and identity of the church is not located in the past or the present, in what the church was given as an institution or in what it is today,

but in the future, in the *eschaton*, in what it will become. As the scholia attributed to St. Maximus the Confessor note regarding symbols in the commentary on the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, “For the things of the Old Testament are shadow, the things of the New Testament are image, and those of the future state are truth.”²⁶ As the theology behind this passage suggests, there is plenty of room for considered innovation in the Christian faith, and it is the business of theology to spell out ways of making room for the new while maintaining the proper balance between past tradition and future enlargement – fallibility as well as innovation are virtues fit for the world’s faiths as well.

For all these and more reasons, it should be added by way of conclusion that the notion of “progress” should not scare or disconcert us Orthodox Christians as we move forward in our somewhat bumpy trajectory well into the 21st century. Contrary to what conservative theorists, more or less eschewers of liberal democracy (of the likes of Georges Sorel²⁷, Karl Kraus, Max Nordau²⁸, Oswald Spengler²⁹, and others of the same ilk), were fond of rehashing, social and political progress is real and has been attained in a significant way. It may be very fragile and subject to terrible setbacks, but it has occurred and, more often than not, is the accomplishment of contractualist visionaries who dared to think – at least partially – outside the box of communal, inherited wisdom. “Freestanding,” namely liberal ethical and political concepts are not ghosts; they are real and concern the shared values that helped shape Western civilization as a tolerant, open-ended and forward-looking culture.

Conclusion

In the public sphere, Christians are no less willing (or entitled) than others to proclaim their own vision of justice, featuring a world that respects the dignity of its citizens as living images of God. Drawing on its founding principles,

26 Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012), 110–2. Maximus’s saying at the end of Kalaitzidis’ passage comes from Maximus the Confessor, *Commentary on the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, PG 4, 137D. As noted by Kalaitzidis himself, today, most scholars attribute this work to John of Scythopolis.

27 Georges Sorel, *The Illusion of Progress*, Foreword by Robert A. Nisbet, John and Charlotte Stanley, trans. (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1969). For a liberal critique of Sorel’s reactionary views of science and culture, see Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 296–332.

28 Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* (Eastford CT: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

29 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkison (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Christianity is indeed able to contribute constructively towards such efforts, albeit not in the sense of advancing a political project, i.e., on condition that Christians remain mindful of the insurmountable asymmetry between the heavenly and the earthy kingdoms. Losing sight of this asymmetry is precisely what liberals warn about. The alluring temptation facing Christians, shared by members of most organized religions, consists of the desire to make the world more *pious*, not *just*; in practical terms, this theocratic seduction is tantamount to forcing the coming of the Lord's Kingdom in history, with a view to establishing paradise on earth, even at the expense of people's freedoms and rights. The problem with utopias, secular and religious alike, however benevolent, is (as Karl Popper has wisely pointed out) that they inevitably end up being falsified by reality, which turns out to be much more complex and unpredictable than even the brightest utopians could ever imagine. Insofar as they rely on a single mind's soteriological plan, utopias are totalitarian from their very inception, as they allow for little or no room at all for the unexpected, for life's exceptions that inexorably contradict ambitious determinisms. To sustain themselves, theocracies and utopias are forced to grow murderous to the point of sacrificing people in the name of goals that have become ends in themselves: integral to them is a suffocating one-way road that nullifies critical thought, prevents contact with external reality and punishes any departure from the project's predetermined "official line." Any prospect for freedom and innovation in such a rigidly crafted system (secular or theocratic) is out of the question. Even the noblest of visionaries are predominantly conservative because, in their desire to change the world for the better, they want to change it at once and for all in a single way. This is why liberalism insists that, instead of new grand utopias, we need self-knowledge, realism, moderation, open-mindedness and compassion – the very things that utopias destroy – only to prove at the end of the day that small minds and endless carnage usually hide behind "great ideas."

The rejection of theocracy notwithstanding, liberalism is by no means an adversary of religion. Far from that, it should be considered a useful ally to faith and Christianity in particular, if anything, due to the categorical distinction between God and Caesar raised by Christ Himself in the Gospels. What institutional Christianity must accept, though, in our pluralistic post-Christian milieu is that while Christians enjoy complete freedom of speech and worship, as indeed they should, theirs is but one voice among several others claiming our attention. Liberals would agree that the Church, like other religious communities, must be free to win over people again but should not seek to do so with state support, counting for its success on the authority of the monarch and the police. Instead, the Church should learn to rely on the quality of its kerygma as a means of attracting people. The question is, however: Does its

voice meet the standards of quality expected from a hallowed institution of its stature? This is the sole fundamental question that should concern the Church nowadays. The answer depends on whether institutional Christianity has abrogated humanism for the sake of embracing legalism and state force as a way of remaining “afloat,” at the expense, of course, of being relative. The Church stands a chance to make its voice respected if it appears sincerely willing to engage in dialogue with modern society and its members – not as an immovable and self-righteous catechist, but as an empathetic listener of the pain and the anxieties of people, as something that remains alive to the anguish striking the world and learns from it, even as it brings this world to a free, sacramental union with Christ. It is a fundamental principle of Christianity that no one should be dragged to salvation in handcuffs. Liberalism ensures the observance on the political level of this valuable but often forgotten (by the institutional Church) principle as it uncompromisingly fights against the lecherous entanglement of the priesthood with Caesar. Thus, liberalism demonstrates in principle a more courageous resistance of the third temptation famously resisted by Christ atop the mountain than the historical Church has done.