

Introduction: Catholicism and Liberal Democracy

The present issue of the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* offers a collection of essays organized around the theme of “Catholicism and Liberal Democracy,” where “liberal democracy” refers to a constitutional and democratic state, with a “free” or “market” economy. For our purposes, we also assume the “secular state,” meaning one in which no particular religion is established, but where the freedom to practice the religion of one’s choice is defined as a constitutional right (i.e., as in Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae*). Although in the post conciliar years it seemed to be definitively settled that Catholicism was highly compatible with such liberal democratic and secular (as defined above) states, the question of their compatibility has been raised anew, especially in the last two decades, due to the development of deepening tensions.

As readers are well aware, these tensions have centered on moral disagreements between Catholic tradition (or even traditional Western moral standards in general) and public policies, especially those allowing the taking of human life at its beginning and end (the primary problem addressed by John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*), and those policies undermining of the procreative family unit based upon the institution of the stable marriage between a man and a woman. More broadly, these tensions also reflect the corrosive effects that such liberal and capitalist (and thus consumerist) societies can have on personal character, on familial and communal integrity, on the natural environment, and on religious practice. In the worst cases, which seem to be becoming more frequent, laws are being passed in liberal democracies that present Catholic citizens and institutions with the choice between cooperating with policies against their moral (and even doctrinal) convictions or abandoning fields such as health care and social services (like adoption).

All of our contributing authors are acutely aware of these tensions and weighty conflicts. We can, however, categorize the first group of essays as focused more on making clear these emerging problems; some even trace these tensions to fundamental flaws at the very metaphysical roots of liberal democracy, which can be remedied only by radical reform of the constitutional order. Similarly, we can categorize the second group of essays as reflecting the views of thinkers who tend to see the constitutional and secular state more as a genuine political and philosophical achievement, or at least as a given with no foreseeable alternative. In light of the apparently growing tensions already noted, some of these later thinkers are especially concerned that Catholics increase their participation in democratic processes for the sake of the common good, and avoid adopting a stance marked by criticism of the constitutional order. Such thinkers further specify, however, that liberal democracies need to recover a mode of moral reason (i.e., what Catholics have traditionally called “natural law,” but which might be located simply under the heading of “reason”) sufficient to uphold essential elements of the common good: respect for human life; the procreative family unit; the right of persons and institutions to be free from coercive pressure to violate their reasonable convictions.

Within our first group of essays emphasizing the fundamental tensions between Catholicism and liberal democracy, the initial contribution is by David L. Schindler of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family (Washington, DC), and is entitled “Civil Community Inside the Liberal State: Truth, Freedom, and Human Dignity.” Working out of the *ressourcement* tradition and especially indebted to the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Schindler argues that the modern liberal-judicial state, despite its good intentions, is unable “to secure an authentic civil community grounded in truth, freedom and human dignity.” Such states are radically (i.e., the Latin *radix* for root) disordered because they “bear a hidden and instrumentalist metaphysical logic that undermines them”; though liberalism claims a purely political meaning for terms like peace, liberty, equality, and economic efficiency, they inherently bear an instrumentalist metaphysics. Because of these metaphysical foundations, such states and societies misconceive man as a self-interested agent, subordinate truth to freedom and rights, and – through such fundamental errors – ultimately and systemically lead to the violence that characterizes such societies. For Schindler, states and societies must instead be grounded in the fundamental truths about God, man and the created order, which requires a metaphysics or ontology of constitutive relations (persons as constituted by relations), “which implies the idea of being as gift,” and “the human person as an order of love.” Modern liberal states, therefore, must be reformed in their very metaphysical roots to reflect these principles.

To the extent that alternative assessments of liberalism by Catholic writers are not rooted in this “ontology of constitutive relations” and “being as gift,” Schindler judges that they are not adequate to Second Vatican Council, to the teaching pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, or to the truth of things. Nor, for Schindler, can an articulation of the lay role in a secular state suffice unless it is articulated (in Balthasarian terms) as a “Marian-Johannine” participation “in the sacramental-eucharistic reality of the Church.” Readers will notice that Schindler writes explicitly as a theologian, employing biblical and theological categories, and – if I understand correctly – insisting that these are the necessary to speak adequately of the political sphere, an emphasis reflecting the Augustinianism of *ressourcement* theology. Thus, the essay raises not only the perennial question of the relation between philosophy and theology, but also that of the place of Schindler’s *Communio* theology in Catholic social teaching (and more generally, through his claims about the necessity of certain understandings of being, of reason, of truth, of freedom, and of “the person as an order of love”). His essay raises a range of other important questions, including not only those in the field of ontology or metaphysics, but also those concerning the role of appeals to metaphysics and theological categories in the political sphere of civil discourse.

The second essay, by Robert Kraynak of Colgate University, also reflects a keen sensitivity to the growing tensions between religious faith and liberal democratic society. In his “Citizenship in Two Worlds: On the Tensions between Christian Faith and American Democracy,” Kraynak discusses the shift from the thesis of an “essential harmony,” which was widely held from the eighteenth through the late twentieth century, to the growing concerns that liberal democracy may

be intrinsically hostile to Christian faith. In so doing, he notes the growing materialism, relativism and secularization of liberal democracies. In order to show why many today think human rights cannot be reconciled with Christianity, Kraynak articulates several arguments regarding their subversive character. These concern the tensions between the authority claims of Christianity and these rights, the Catholic priority of duties over rights, the Catholic priority of the common good over private goods, the tension between Christian sacrificial love and rights, and the autonomy implicit in rights. Kraynak further articulates serious problems inherent to contemporary democracy, especially the leveling and degrading effects of mass culture (which intrinsically follow from the free market). He concludes that Christians must face these tensions honestly and learn to live as “citizens of two worlds” that are not necessarily in harmony.

The third essay is by David M. Wagner of Regent University, who outlines Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of the rationality of traditions, and thus his radical critique of liberalism, the tradition that (ironically) emerges following the Enlightenment rejection of tradition. Wagner’s essay includes a summary of MacIntyre’s account of how the Enlightenment rejected tradition for a supposedly neutral rationality but ended up creating its own tradition of enquiry (namely liberalism), the failure of which is now evident, resulting – since tradition has been dismissed and neutral rationality discredited – in the reduction of morality to mere “emotivism.” Wagner also summarizes MacIntyre’s claim that the “is-ought problem” is the key to the failure of Enlightenment moral philosophy (i.e., because Enlightenment moral philosophy radically separates the speculative order of knowing things in the world from practical order of action). For MacIntyre, Enlightenment political philosophy fares no better than its moral philosophy, given the inability of this tradition to resolve moral disputes in the political realm, which thereby undermines its claim to rationality. This failure of the Enlightenment project, according to MacIntyre, requires a choice between the nihilism of Nietzsche or the tradition of Aristotelian and Thomistic rationality and virtue ethics. For MacIntyre, the superiority of the latter can be seen in its facilitation of human flourishing whereas the former leads to the deterioration of community and virtue. Wagner further discusses MacIntyre’s efforts toward the recovery of this tradition of enquiry and virtue, including his later work on the moral relevance of human embodiment.

If such criticisms of liberalism – and those represented here are but a reflection of broader tendencies – are correct, the implications for Catholic social teaching are considerable. These include a proper understanding of Catholic teachings regarding religious freedom, human rights, the acceptability of constitutional democracy, and the extent to which it is consistent with the common good.

The next three essays are by authors who might be described as more sympathetic to liberal or constitutional democracy as a political and philosophical achievement, and who tend to be unpersuaded by its more radical critics; as noted above, such writers generally recognize that liberal societies are often in urgent need of the active participation of Christians, and that the common good requires reforms so societies better follow the moral law, especially in respecting human life and supporting the stable, procreative family unit.

The first of these essays is by Martin Rhonheimer of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and is entitled, “Christian Secularity, Political Ethics and the Culture of Human Rights.” Rhonheimer argues that the key elements of modern constitutional states are fully consistent with the best of the Christian tradition, and that Christians should embrace their role as active participants, while necessarily maintaining a clear understanding of the “Augustinian dualism” between the cities of God and man. In so doing, Rhonheimer offers valuable insights into (i) the political ethics of the modern culture of human rights (i.e., that it seeks to advance an ethos of law, justice, freedom and peace), (ii) the need for this political ethics to be supported by a rational ethical discourse (i.e., reason, natural law, virtue) regarding the requirements of justice (i.e., the defense of human life and the procreative family unit founded in a marriage of a man and a woman), (iii) the challenges posed by an Islamic understanding of political culture (which does not accept the above mentioned liberal ethos of human rights and freedom), and (iv) the distinction between a healthy pluralism and a “multiculturalism” that rejects the consensus regarding the fundamentals of this liberal political culture, and thus is not compatible with it.

Readers will notice that Rhonheimer writes here as a political philosopher, employing language accessible to a range of interlocutors. It might be helpful for readers to contextualize his present essay in the broader context of his work. For Rhonheimer, truth is intrinsically intelligible and therefore at least potentially accessible to all, though they will often need the assistance of revelation to attain it. Because of this, he is able both to argue in broadly accessible language and to benefit from deeper insights into the truth from the Catholic tradition. In his broader writings in philosophical philosophy, he offers detailed engagements with the work of leading philosophers on topics like the common good, the defense of life in constitutional democracies, human rights, different understandings of secularity, the relation of truth and law, and the place of natural law in civil discourse. When, elsewhere, he writes specifically as a Christian philosopher, Rhonheimer articulates a rich and Christocentric spirituality of work, including and the responsibility of Christians to imbue this world and secular realities with the spirit of Christ.

The second essay among these thinkers more supportive of liberal democracy is “Natural Law Liberalism,” by Christopher Wolfe of The Ralph McInerny Center for Thomistic Studies. In this essay, Wolfe begins by summarizing the main characteristics and deficiencies of the political philosophy of John Rawls, who was arguably the most prominent of recent liberal theorists. Wolfe then offers a more general outline of the key characteristics of liberalism, which he uses as the basis for explaining not only why advocates of natural law theory should find it congenial, but also its limitations, which require that it draw upon the resources of moral rationality as embodied in the tradition of natural law. In concluding, Wolfe addresses briefly those he recognizes to be serious contemporary Christian intellectuals who have articulated harsh criticisms of liberalism. He acknowledges the differing forms of liberal societies and suggests that the extreme and particularly problematic examples of contemporary liberalism should be understood not as the logical culmination of it, but as a possible development, especially when liberalism is not accompanied by Christian detachment from dangers like consumerism.

The third of these essays is by V. Bradley Lewis of The Catholic University of America, who treats “The Common Good and the Modern State.” In it, Lewis critically engages some of Alasdair MacIntyre’s “quite radical” views on political philosophy, especially his claim regarding the inherent incompatibilities between modern states and Aristotelian and Thomistic notions of the common good. Lewis argues that MacIntyre’s claim is ambiguous and overly broad, and that his analysis is unnecessarily negative and also “untrue to what most citizens take the state to represent.” He also questions MacIntyre’s notion of the common good, including its relation to that of the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition. Lewis concludes that, in light of the common good as understood in this latter tradition, the modern state should be understood as exercising its authority in a way that is connected in a non-trivial way with the common good, though a thinner notion of it. In discussing whether MacIntyre’s confidence in the ability of the local communities to reach consensus on important matters reflects a kind of utopianism, Lewis suggests that recognition of the partial compatibility between the Aristotelian / Thomistic views of the common good and liberalism rightly reflects the admirable realism of that tradition.

The fourth essay among those emphasizing the basic compatibility between Catholicism and liberal democracy is by David Thunder of Villanova University, and is entitled “Are Traditional Catholics Defective Citizens?” Thunder argues that such Catholics, who will have moral objections to various prevailing public policies, are still good citizens. In fact, they bring unique and valuable resources for resisting political oppression and injustice. This essay provides an apt segue to the penultimate one by Richard Myers of Ave Maria Law School, who considers “Current Legal Issues Regarding Rights to Conscience in Health Care.” In so doing, Myers explains that current law provides little protection for persons and institutions who do not want to cooperate in actions that violate traditional moral principles, especially in areas concerning the respect for human life and sexual ethics. He considers appeals to the right of conscience as necessary in the short term, but emphasizes that long term success requires the achievement of broader public consensus through rational argumentation about the requirements of justice and natural law.

This issue of the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* concludes with an essay by J. Brian Benestad of the University of Scranton, who offers an analytical summary of Pope Benedict XVI’s recent encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, highlighting key themes such as love in truth, the common good, solidarity, religious freedom, respect for the environment, and the priority of duties over rights. As we would expect, the Holy Father gives particular attention to the main points of concern to our authors, including the sanctity of human life, the institution of marriage, the family as the locus of procreation, and the natural law.

May our readers find this issue of the *Josephinum Journal of Theology* helpful in fostering deeper insights into the relation between the City of God and the City of Man in our contemporary historical context.

William F. (Bill) Murphy, Jr.
Associate Professor of Moral Theology and Editor