

The Freedom of the Church and the Taming of the State: The Christian Revolution, Western Liberty & the Rise of the New Leviathan [Christendom College/ April 29, 2013] – Kenneth L. Grasso

My topic today concerns the relevance of Christianity – and specifically, the Christian idea of the freedom of the Church -- to the Western heritage of freedom. My argument will be essentially twofold: First, that Christianity – and, in specific, the Christian ideas of the freedom of the Church and dignity of the person -- pointed us toward a new and revolutionary understanding of society that transformed Western political life and played a critically important role in laying the groundwork for Western liberty. Secondly, that the history of the past several centuries suggests that liberal modernity's attempt to carry forward the quest for freedom set in motion by Christianity on a new and entirely secular basis is in deep trouble. I'll conclude by suggesting that there are serious reasons for doubting the sustainability of the project of taming the state in our increasingly secularized, post-Christian, post- metaphysical cultural milieu.

I

Christianity, as I said a moment ago, pointed to a new and revolutionary understanding of political life. At the risk of oversimplifying, it might be said that the Christian revolution was rooted in two foundational concepts in the Christian vision of man and society.

The first of these is the freedom of the Church. Although the actual phrase "the freedom of the Church" would appear to be of medieval origin, the idea, as Hugo Rahner has shown, has an ancient pedigree dating to Christianity's first centuries. Indeed, it is rooted in the very "distinction between Church and State" that, as Benedict XVI has recently reminded us, is "fundamental to Christianity." With the exception of the sovereignty of God over the affairs of

men and societies, there is perhaps no principle more foundational to Catholic social teaching. As the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, affirms:

Among the things which concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth – things therefore which are always and everywhere to be kept secure and defended against all injury – this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy the full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. This freedom is sacred, because the only-begotten Son endowed with it the Church he purchased with His blood. It is so much the property of the Church that to act against it is to act against the will of God.

The freedom of the Church – which pertains to the Church both in “her character as a spiritual authority, established by Christ the Lord” and charged with “preaching the Gospel to every creature” and “in her character as a society of men” seeking “to live in society in accordance with the precepts of the Christian faith” – “is the fundamental principle” governing “the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order.” Indeed, the establishment and maintenance of this freedom, has been the first task of the Church vis-à-vis the social and political order; it is, in Joseph Ratzinger's words, nothing less than “the basic task of Christian politics,”

What I want to suggest is that the freedom of the Church has been the charter of a far-reaching transformation in social and political life, a transformation of such magnitude as to inaugurate a new era in political history. To appreciate the revolutionary character of this principle, it is necessary first to

appreciate the understanding of man and society that prevailed in antiquity, an understanding that emerges vividly in the Greek idea of the polis.

The small and intimate society of the polis, as Ernest Barker observes “was something more than a political system”; its purposes “went far beyond the legal purpose of detailing and enforcing a body of rules for the control of legal relations.” In fact, the polis “was State and Society in one, without distinction or differentiation; it was a single system of order, or a fused society-state.” Simultaneously “a church” and “an ethical society,” “an economic concern for the purpose of production and trade,” and “a cultural association for the common pursuit of beauty and truth,” the polis was a “sovereign and all-inclusive association “embracing and regulating” human life in all its dimensions: religious, moral, political, economic, familial, artistic, cultural, and scientific. This compact and undifferentiated ontology of social life was characteristic of classical antiquity in general: while the empires of classical antiquity were certainly larger than the Greek polis, they shared its all-inclusive, all-embracing character.

What emerges here was a vision of society whose most striking characteristic was its monism. To begin with, the loyalty owed to these orders was in general conceived to be an ultimate loyalty from which there could be no appeal to any higher authority. There was no truth beyond truth of the empire or polis; it alone was the authoritative interpreter of the human person’s nature and destiny, and the locus in which that destiny was achieved. If there was but one truth (the truth of the polis or empire) and one authorized interpreter of that truth (the polis or empire), there was only one community and one law. Inasmuch as society was but a single homogenous structure, all groups and

associations were absorbed in its all-embracing undifferentiated, unity. Just as they acknowledged no distinction between church and state, between the religion and the politics, so they acknowledged no distinction between the social and political, no independent sphere of social life standing outside of its direct control, beyond its jurisdiction. This monism found powerful expression in Roman law that made all groups dependent upon the will of the state for the exercise of their functions and authorities.

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent why Ernest Barker maintained that there was “dynamite” in the biblical admonition to render unto God what is God’s and unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. In sharp contrast to the monistic understanding of the structure of social life that prevailed in antiquity in which the polis or empire was simultaneously state, society and Church without distinction or differentiation and the political power represented society in both its religious and political aspects, what emerged as a result of what might be called the Christian revolution was a dyarchical vision of society. In this vision, the family of mankind was to be organized in two societies, under two laws emanating from two authorities.

Under the impact of this revolution, the claims of the state were limited, relativized and secularized. The “polis” or “empire” now become the “state,” and was forced to share the stage with a new social actor, the Church, an actor that claimed both a greater dignity than it and a God-given freedom vis-à-vis it. Now, the political community and the Church must be understood as autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. Now, the state, as Voegelin notes, is radically de-divinized – it ceases to be the ultimate milieu of human perfection, the authoritative interpreter or representative of man’s nature

and destiny, of God's will for humanity, or the ultimate judge of right and wrong; it loses the responsibility for the care of souls, the responsibility for guiding man to his ultimate destiny.

The second Christian concept is the dignity of the individual human person. Here again, to grasp the revolutionary character of this concept, it is necessary to first briefly turn our attention to pre-Christian times. The social orders of antiquity had what might be described as a strongly communitarian, even collectivistic character. In this dispensation, as Glenn Tinder notes individuals were understood as tools to be employed by the social order for purposes of procreation, war and labor. As Peter Brown has shown, society was thus, "the arbiter of the body," the "use and very right to exist [of which] was subject to predominately civic considerations of status and utility." This collectivism, in turn, was linked with what, for lack of a better term, might be called the "elitism" of the classical world, its insistence that some people are fundamentally more important than others, that some people and some lives just don't matter very much. Closely linked with the classical tradition's disparagement of what Charles Taylor calls "ordinary life," its most visible sign is that tradition's attitude toward slavery.

The Christian affirmation of the dignity, the sacredness, of the human person pointed toward a new understanding of not only of the human person, but of the relationship between the individual and society. This affirmation broke, as Fustel de Coulanges pointed out in his classic study, the "absolute empire" of the city over the individual. Inasmuch as, in the words of St. Peter, we must obey God rather than man, the state can no longer claim a final authority over the conscience of man. "To obey Caesar is [now] no longer the

same thing as to obey God.” Indeed, by virtue of his transtemporal destiny, the human person now transcends the body politic. Thus, “the first duty no longer consisted in giving one’s time, one’s strength and one’s life to the state. Politics . . . [was] no longer the whole of man; all virtues were no longer comprised in patriotism.” Thus, as Francis Oakley writes, “the Christian . . . was a man of divided loyalties. . . . He could not owe an absolute loyalty to any earthly society, even if it be the state, for he believed in a higher loyalty, one which transcended the merely political, and it was this higher authority and to this alone that he owed his allegiance.”

At the same time, under the impact of Christian revelation, the individual human person – as a being created in the image of God, united to God through the incarnation and called to eternal participation in the life of the persons of the Holy Trinity – received a new and what John Paul II terms “an almost divine dignity”; and freedom emerged as a defining feature of our nature and dignity. (In St. Augustine’s classic formulation, although God created us without our consent, he will not save us without our consent.) Now individuals could no longer be viewed, in the manner of classical antiquity, as mere instruments to be put to civic purposes. Now, as Christopher Dawson writes, “every man, even the poorest and weakest, only belonged in part to the state. His personality was free and possessed an absolute spiritual value, which was incomparably higher than anything in the economic or political order.”

The essential point is this: the Christian vision of man and society involved wholesale break with the understanding of social life that prevailed in classical antiquity. As Joseph Ratzinger notes, the Christian distinction between the things of God’s and the things of Caesar’s and insistence on the freedom of

the Church, “called into question the whole concept of the state in antiquity, and it is quite understandable that the Greco-Roman state saw in this denial of its totalitarian claims an attack on its very foundations which it avenged with the death penalty. If Jesus’ teaching was true, then the Roman state could not go on as it had hitherto existed.”

At the heart of this far-reaching transformation was a relativization of the state’s claims, and a dramatic diminution in both its ontological dignity and its role in the overall economy of human social life. No longer could the state be the center of social gravity, as it were; no longer could it be the unchallenged ruler of the social universe; no longer could its ends be coextensive with the overall ends of human life, or even with the goals of temporal life; no longer could it be the ultimate locus of human fulfillment, the bearer and authoritative interpreter of the ultimate truth about the meaning of human existence; no longer could individuals be seen as mere parts of society, as mere instruments to be employed for social purposes.

The Christian affirmation of the freedom of the Church and dignity of the person, in short, demanded the taming of the state, the taming of leviathan – the establishment of a new type of state, a state purged of the monistic and absolutistic pretensions that have historically characterized government.

The Christian revolution thus fundamentally transformed Western political life imparting to Western civilization a number of its distinguishing characteristics in the process laying the groundwork for the rise of Western liberty. As Oakley writes, the Christian revolution issued in “something new in the history of mankind,” namely, in “a society in which the state is stripped of its age-old religious aura,” and its claims “are balanced and curtailed by the claims

of a rival authority; a society distinguished therefore by an established institutional dualism and racked by the internal tensions resulting therefrom.”

And, it is in the transformation wrought by Christianity that we encounter the one of the most important sources of the Western ideal of constitutionally limited government. On the one hand, as Harold Berman writes, “the duality of secular and spiritual authorities . . . placed both practical and theoretical limitations on the power of each” assuring that “neither . . . could command the total allegiance of any subject.” On the other hand, the effort to draw the line between the respective spheres of church and state leads ultimately to the idea of limited government. The state and its organs come to have limited powers because they have limited goals and functions.

Likewise, it is in the impact of Christianity on Western man’s self-understanding that we encounter the origins of Western culture’s historically distinctive emphasis on the worth and value of the individual human person as a foundational value from which social and political life must take its bearings. “The profoundest and most wide-seeing minds of Greece and Rome,” as Tocqueville wrote, “never managed to grasp the very general but very simple conception of the likeness of all men and of the equal right of all at birth to liberty.... Their minds roamed free in all directions but were blinkered there. Jesus Christ had to come down to earth to make all members of the human race understand that they were naturally similar and equal.” As Brian Tierney observes in his seminal study of the origins of the idea of natural rights, it is no accident that this idea “grew up . . . in a religious culture . . . with a faith in which human beings were seen as children of a caring God.” Something similar might well be said about Western culture’s insistence that freedom and equality are

defining features of a rightly ordered society; its insistence that, in Glenn Tinder's words, "no one belongs at the bottom, enslaved, irremediably poor, consigned to silence"; and that transcending the state and its purposes, individuals must be treated as ends rather than means, and as far more than mere instruments to be put to civic purposes.

Thus, as Joseph Ratzinger observes, it is precisely the "new dualism" that arises from the Christian distinction between Church and state and the insistence on the freedom of the Church that emerges from it that "represents the source" of "the Western idea of freedom." By ending "the identification of state and religion," by separating "the *ius sacrum*" from "the *ius publicum*," Christianity fundamentally revolutionized political life depriving "the state of its totalitarian claims" and created "space for freedom of conscience." It thus set "a limit" to "every earthly power" and proclaimed a "freedom" for "the person . . . which transcends all political systems. For this limit Jesus went to his death."

It is in the Christian revolution, in other words, that we find the ultimate origins of the effort to tame the state that looms so large in Western political history; and of the liberal tradition in Western politics through which this effort has expression with its commitment to the ideal of government that is limited in its scope, subject in its operations to the rule of law, responsible to those it governs, and dedicated to the protection of the rights of the human person and the institutions of civil society.

In practice, however, taming the state has proven to be no simple matter. To put it gently, governments (including avowedly Christian ones) have, as a general rule, resisted taming. Historically, states have exhibited a pronounced tendency to seek to absorb the Church and all of human social life in themselves,

and to make themselves into the center of social gravity. Indeed, as Michael Burleigh has recently reminded us, this tendency has manifested itself with particular vividness in the modern era. Not only has Caesar proven reluctant to renounce his claims to divinity, but he has remained a jealous god. The simple fact is that since the earliest days of Christianity the Church's claim to freedom in the face of the state has been a source of constant conflict, and that this freedom has not been voluntarily ceded by the state, but has had to be repeatedly won at a very high cost.

Finally, if taming Leviathan has proven to be no easy matter, historically speaking, the taming of the state that we take for granted as a defining feature of Western civilization is simply unimaginable without the massive social presence and moral authority of the Church as a counterweight to the power and authority of the state. "As a matter of history," as John Courtney Murray wrote, the liberal tradition of western politics did not begin its lengthy, slow, and halting evolution because something like Harnack's wraith-like Wesen des Christentums began to pervade the dominions of ancient Rome. This pale phantom would have been altogether unequal to the task of inaugurating a new political history. What appeared within history was not an "idea" or an "essence" but an existence, a Thing, a visible institution that occupied ground in this world at the same time that it asserted an astounding new freedom on a title not of this world. Through the centuries a new tradition of politics was wrought out very largely in the course of the wrestlings between the new freedom of the Church and the pretensions of an older power which kept discovering, to its frequent

chagrin, that it was not the one unchallengeable ruler of the world and that its rule was not unlimitedly free.

Western liberty, in short, was forged in the crucible of Church-state conflict.

II

The liberal tradition did not disappear with the coming of modernity nor did the project of taming the state cease. Indeed, in the modern era witnessed the rise of a new form of government – commonly designated liberal democracy – inspired by a commitment to the rights and dignity of the person, limited government and the rule of law, and characterized by a wide variety of institutional mechanisms (e.g., free and fair elections, separation of powers, checks and balances, guarantees of rights enforced by an independent judiciary, etc.) designed precisely to check state power, to tame Leviathan.

If, as John Courtney Murray noted, however, liberal modernity initially adopted “the whole system of moral values, both individual and social, which had been elaborated under the influence of the Christian revelation” -- “all the values which form a constellation about the central concept, *res sacra homo*” -- liberal modernity “adopted these values” as its “very basis,” if it attempted to carry on the project of taming the state set in motion by Christianity, it nevertheless diverged from the outset in subtle but important ways from the Christian tradition; and over time moved progressively away from that tradition. It did so under the impact of the intellectual movement that dominated the modern cultural scene: the Enlightenment. The inner dynamism of Enlightenment rationalism propelled

liberalism toward an ever more radical individualism and secularism, and ever deeper religious and moral skepticism, toward an ever more complete break with the Christian vision of man and society.

Insisting that, whatever their historical origins may have been, the core values of the liberal tradition are, in Murray's words, "now known to be simply immanent in man" and are, in fact, "now simply a human possession, a conquest and achievement of humanity itself," liberal modernity maintained that Christianity was longer needed as a dynamic of freedom and justice in the world. Now that modernity has "arrived," Christianity may simply "disappear." Rejecting not merely the Christian vision of the nature and destiny of the human person, but its dualistic vision of society as well, liberal modernity instead insisted that "the *only sovereign spiritual authority* would be the conscience of the free man" which would be trusted to "effectively mediate the moral imperatives of the transcendental order of justice (whose existence was not doubted in the earlier phases of the modern experiment)" and through "the workings of free political institutions" translate these imperatives into "binding norms" upon the state. Religion, in this view, was at best a personal, private matter irrelevant to the affairs of state and systematically excluded from public life. The result is a vision of society "ultimately monist in structure . . . and ultimately secular in substance."

The project of taming of the state, in short, is now to be carried on a purely secular basis and in a social environment from which religion was excluded; and the liberal tradition in Western politics was transformed from an expression of the Christian revolution to an experiment in what George Weigel has aptly termed politics without God.

Now, anyone committed to the cause of freedom must acknowledge and assimilate the very real and very valid achievements of liberal modernity. But acknowledging these achievements leaves unanswered the question of whether the modern experiment – the experiment of seeking to carry on the quest for freedom, the project of taming the state set in motion by Christianity, on a secular basis -- has succeeded. Many contemporary observers believe that it has, and a quick glance at the history of the past several centuries demonstrates why they think this to be the case.

One thinks in this context of the spread of liberal democracy after the Second World War, and, in particular, the third wave of democratization that began in the late 1970s. Scholars like Samuel Huntington and Michael Mandelbaum point out that while just two centuries ago the globe was home to just one country that might plausibly be called a liberal democracy, namely, the United States; and while one hundred years ago only a handful of liberal democracies existed (most of them in the English speaking world), by 1975 the number of liberal democracies had grown to thirty countries, and by 2005 almost one hundred and twenty countries. The fact is that today liberal democracy has emerged as the world's reigning political ideal -- so dominant, in fact, that it is not at all unusual to see even brutal dictatorships attempting to wrap themselves in the mantle of liberal democracy. In this context, it's easy to see why thinkers like Francis Fukuyama would begin to ruminate on the end of history, on the resolution of humanity's long-standing debate on the best form of government.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to see why someone might conclude that contemporary political history testifies to the success of the modern experiment, that it verifies liberal modernity's claim that the quest for freedom launched can

be carried forward on purely secular basis, that a secular vision of man and the world supplies us with the full range of resources we need to successfully ground and effectively institutionalize the values and principles that this quest embodies.

While the facts invoked – the spread of liberal democracy over the past fifty years cannot be denied, one might well question whether the conclusion being drawn actually follows. One could well wonder whether these new democracies will endure. Indeed, in this context one could point out that historically liberal democracy has proven to be a rare and fragile form of government; and that this is at least in part because it depends for its vitality and ultimately its very viability on a complex set of economic, political, social and cultural preconditions. Against this backdrop, one might well argue that there is absolutely no guarantee that all or even most these new democracies will survive, and thus that liberal democracy's status as the political wave of the future is at best uncertain. Indeed, one might point out that today many astute commentators in America and Europe – commentators, it might be added, of a wide variety of political persuasions – are wondering aloud if we are not witnessing the gradual erosion liberal democracy's prerequisites in the Western world. Just two or three days ago, the renowned classicist Donald Kagan was quoted in the Wall Street Journal speculating that “democracy may have had its day.”

One might also draw attention to the notoriously inaccurate character of prognostications about the political future: After all, at several points in the course of the 20th century – I'm thinking in particularly of the 1930s and 1960s here -- liberal democracy was widely regarded as failed experiment, and various

authoritarian alternatives were being all but universally heralded as the wave of the future.

Furthermore, one might argue that just as it is no accident that liberal democracy emerged on the soil of what had once been Christendom, so the dynamism driving its advance is ultimately found in the impact of Christianity on human self-understanding and culture, and thus that this advance must be seen as what Maritain terms a temporal manifestation of the influence of the Gospel. In this view, its secularism to the contrary notwithstanding, modern liberalism continues to trade on a body of capital -- ideas, understandings, and values -- generated by the revolution in human self-understanding produced by Christianity. As Jurgen Habermas, someone who certainly can't be dismissed as a Christian apologist has noted:

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the idea of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. . . . [W]e continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

Likewise, one could well read the history of modern times very differently. I think in this context of the work of the great French historian and political theorist, Bertrand de Jouvenel. Modern Western political history,

Jouvenel argues, is not as is commonly claimed the story of the progressive triumph of freedom, of the progressive liberation of the individual from arbitrary, despotic governments and oppressive social institutions. Rather, while state power has had its “ups and downs,” the broad trajectory of Western history “from the time of Europe’s fragmentation into sovereign states, shows us an almost uninterrupted growth of governmental” power, an ever-growing “concentration of forces” in the hands of “the state”, which disposes, as the centuries goes, of “of ever ampler resources, claims over the community ever wider rights, and tolerates ever less authority existing outside of itself.” While state power has waxed and waned, the picture as a whole is one of the gradual advance of state power – the relentless growth of its instruments, revenues, personnel – and the ongoing decline of the matrix of institutions, traditions, and beliefs which had historically checked it,

It is true, Jouvenel acknowledges, that the ideals of limited government and individual liberty have loomed large in Western man’s political consciousness and that many efforts have been made to institutionalize these ideals—of which modern democracy is the most notable. Indeed, the source of modern democracy’s appeal has been its “claim to have civilized and domesticated” the state – the Minotaur as he calls it – to have found a way of checking and directing governmental power, of making it into “a servant . . . of those great and fair ideas, law and liberty.” In reality, however, if modern democracy has succeeded to some degree in civilizing state power – in making it a bit gentler – it has certainly not succeeded in checking its relentless expansion. The coming of democracy, Jouvenel concludes, has issued not so much in the taming of the state – the taming of the Minotaur -- as in the conveyance of state

power to new owners – and if in theory these new owners are the people, in actuality they are the interests and political elites most able to manipulate the levers of political power.

To where is the current modern history sweeping us? Where does the relentless expansion of state power that has defined political modernity end? It culminates, Jouvenel tells us, in the rise of what he calls “the social protectorate” – an omniscient state that will “watch over every man from cradle to grave, repairing the disasters which before him, even when they are of his own making” and take over “the whole business of public and private happiness,” absorbing in the process all the resources and energies of society – to do all, the state must be lord of all -- to which it will “have become the poor-box, the housing authority, and the god.”

Now, Jouvenel’s account might seem a little overwrought, a bit melodramatic, but before we dismiss it out of hand, we might want to reflect on a few things. To begin with, is he not correct that that the overall trend of modern history has been toward the enhancement of state power; that even a modern liberal democratic state disposes of a far larger portion of the community’s resources, commands a immensely larger bureaucracy, and provides a far more comprehensive scheme laws and regulations that even the most absolutist regimes of early modern times?

Secondly, was not the 20th century the century of two world wars, of the holocaust, the gulag, the killing fields? How many hundreds of millions of human being have died at the hands of the modern state or in its wars? And, did not the twentieth century see the emergence of a new kind of state – the

totalitarian state which combined the ruthlessness of history's most brutal tyrants with the power of modern technology?

Finally, one can't but think in this context of Tocqueville's forebodings in the closing chapters *Democracy in America*. As you'll recall, here Tocqueville warns us about a new species of oppression that threatens us in the age of democracy. In contrast to the type of despotism that threatened us in the past – a despotism that was harsh, even brutal, but limited because no despotism of the past was capable of controlling “all the details of social life and of individual existence” – the despotism which threatens us today is gentle but all-encompassing, suffocating. More extensive, but milder, it would degrade men rather than torment them, and retain the external forms while abandoning the substance of freedom. Like so many others, I can't resist quoting him at length here:

I see an innumerable crowd of similar and equal men who spin around restlessly, in order to gain small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each one of them, withdrawn apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others; his children and his particular friends form for him the entire human species; as for the remainder of his fellow citizens, he is next to them, but he does not see them; he touches them without feeling them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. . . .

Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but

on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves, provided that they think only about enjoying themselves. It works willingly for their happiness; but it wants to be the unique agent for it and the sole arbiter; it attends to their security, provides for their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, [and] directs their industry. . . .

[Thus] it makes the use of free will less useful and rarer every day; . . . [and] encloses the action of the will within a smaller space and little by little steals from each citizen even the use of himself. . . .

After having thus taken each individual one by one into its powerful hands . . . the sovereign power . . . covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated, minute, and uniform rules, which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot break through to go beyond the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them and directs them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting; it does not destroy, it prevents birth; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupifies, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

Far from culminating in the triumph of human dignity and individual freedom, in short, Tocqueville feared that modern history would culminate in a new form of servitude -- in the well-meaning, but nevertheless stultifying rule of the

omnicompetent, nanny state over an atomized mass of passive, alienated, and degraded consumers.

In more than two decades of teaching *Democracy in America*, I've never had a class that didn't find this dystopian vision extraordinarily prescient. They find it prescient because it seems to jive with their own experience, with the drift they perceive in the world around them.

Recall my question of a few minutes ago: Has what Murray calls "the modern political experiment" -- the experiment of seeking to carry on the project of taming the state set in motion by the principle of the freedom of the Church on a secular foundation -- succeeded? The verdict of history is at best ambiguous. Against the backdrop of history, I would suggest, it is difficult to maintain that the story of modernity is the story of the triumphant advance of freedom -- indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the modern quest for freedom is in serious trouble.

III

It might be objected, however, that the fact that the modern experiment has not succeeded doesn't mean that at some point it might not do so, that in and of itself it doesn't mean that liberal modernity is engaged in an impossible experiment. The fact that man's initial efforts at flight failed, after all, didn't mean that flight was impossible. While it's perhaps impossible to prove conclusively that this experiment cannot possibly succeed -- how, after all, can you prove a negative -- there are nevertheless serious reasons for doubting whether the project of taming the state can be carried forward on a purely secular basis and in a social universe in which religion is systematically excluded from public life.

In part, these doubts stem from the intellectual climate of late modernity. It is true, of course, that in principle the affirmations and values on which liberal democracy rests can be articulated and defended on purely secular, philosophical grounds independent of any appeal to revelation. One wonders, as a practical matter, however, just how much cultural traction such an effort can get. A satisfactory account of the moral and intellectual foundations of liberal democracy, after all, would necessarily involve an appeal to a metaphysical and moral realism at odds with the skeptical and relativistic temper of our increasingly post-metaphysical intellectual climate.

In part, my doubts about the viability of the modern political experiment are historical and sociological in nature. To begin with, as Murray suggests, “the profound moral confusion” of contemporary Western culture would seem to discredit liberal modernity’s assumption that “the moral consensus on which every society depends for its stability and progress can be sustained and mobilized simply in terms of a fortunate coincidence of individual judgments apart from all reference to a visibly constituted spiritual authority.”

Similarly, there is what might be called the bond the sacred order and the social order. As Dawson has shown, strong and vibrant societies are never simply material unities, but spiritual communities united by a common culture, a common way of life, at whose heart is found a body of “common beliefs and ways of thought.”

The simple historical fact, moreover, is that societies do not understand themselves as purely man-made artifacts, but as sacred orders, as deliberate efforts “to coordinate human action with the transcendent divine power which rules the world.” In an important sense, therefore, social orders are expressions

of religious visions, and it is the religious vision lying at the heart of its culture that inspires and unifies a society, that functions as “the soul” of a social order. Just as “when the soul is gone” the body “putrefies,” so when the religious vision that informs a given social order is lost, the social order itself sooner or later decays. A society that lost its religion, Dawson concludes, is a society in the process of disintegration.

My point is simply this: If Dawson is correct about the bond between the social order and sacred order, the modern political experiment is doomed to fail: A purely secular social order cannot long endure; the loss of the religious vision that launched Western civilization will inevitably issue in far-reaching social disintegration, in the decay of the social orders whose soul this religious vision had provided; and the project of taming the state cannot indefinitely survive the loss of the religious vision that had provided its impetus.

Likewise, there is the linkage between religion and morality, and thus between religion and virtues on which the vitality of free society depends. One thinks in this context of Washington’s famous warning that we must “with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion” because “whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Insofar as “morality is a necessary spring” of free government, therefore, it follows that religion is “indispensable” to such government.

One also thinks in this context of Tocqueville’s famous insistence that the future of religion and the future Western liberty are indissolubly linked -- his doubts as to whether “man can support complete religious independence

and entire political liberty at the same time” – a linkage rooted not only religion’s indispensable role in instilling the virtues that make ordered liberty possible, but its role in inspiring the sense of the dignity, worth and value of human beings that inspires the quest for freedom.

Finally, there is the whole problem of effectively institutionalizing limited government. Today it almost universally acknowledged, that, among other things, successfully taming the state requires the existence of what is called civil society -- a matrix of strong and vibrant social institutions that can simultaneously prevent the state from monopolizing public life or the allegiances of the citizenry; and employ their moral authority to limit, control and direct governmental power. Freedom presupposes a public square with multiple actors – actors who can challenge and compete with one another, and, above all, can check the power of the state.

As the bearers and mediators of the meaning of human existence, religious institutions would seem to be uniquely equipped to challenge the moral authority of government, to relativize its claims, to insist on its accountability to a standard not its own making, to resist its efforts to absorb all of human life in the polis, and to remind it that man’s horizons transcend this world. Religious institutions, in short, play an irreplaceable role in relativizing and constraining the power of the state (hence the unremitting hostility of totalitarian regimes toward them).

In part, these doubts about the viability of modernity’s effort to carry on the project of the taming of the state on a purely secular basis are theological. I will limit myself here to mentioning just two. The first concerns the relationship between dualism, limited government, and Christian

revelation. Ratzinger, for example, seems to suggest that not only does the a regime of limited government presuppose a dualistic vision of society, but that dualism, in turn, presupposes Christianity. Affirming that “only . . . where the duality of state and church, of sacral and political authority is maintained in some form or another do we find the fundamental prerequisite for freedom” and that “dualism . . . presupposes the logic of the Christian thing,” he concludes that “the modern idea of freedom is . . . the product of a Christian environment; it could not have developed anywhere else. Indeed, one must add that it cannot be separated from this Christian environment, and transplanted into any other system.”

This seems to suggest that the Christian notion of dualism not only laid the groundwork for Western liberty, but is in fact essential to its maintenance, that it represents not just the “source” but its “abiding basis.” It also suggests that dualism itself is both unimaginable in theory and unsustainable in practice absent Christianity, that the endurance of Western liberty presupposes “the logic” of Christian revelation and the presence of the Church in public life.

The other theological issue concerns the relationship of faith and reason. In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II spoke for the entire Catholic tradition in noting that faith does not merely open vistas closed to reason, but plays an indispensable role in purifying and perfecting human reason itself. In the aftermath of the fall, reason – “wounded and weakened by sin” -- needs the help of faith, the assistance of grace, to be itself, to do its own work. In this context, he notes there are truths that although in principle accessible to human reason have proven extraordinarily difficult for it to arrive at without

the aid of faith. "Revelation," he writes, "clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason." These truths include the affirmation of "human dignity, equality and freedom."

Liberal modernity's effort to provide a secular foundation for the Western quest for freedom would seem to illustrate this point. Modernity's "fateful separation" of faith and reason issued in a philosophy that is "separate from and absolutely independent of the contents of faith." Far from providing a secure foundation for the ideas and affirmations undergirding Western liberty, John Paul reminds us, the result of this "fateful separation" has been "an ever deeper mistrust with regard to reason itself" ultimately culminating in a "nihilism" which obliterates "the very ground of human dignity."

What the unfolding of the modern intellectual history seems to suggest, in short, is that just as unaided human reason failed to arrive at the truths of human dignity, freedom, and equality, so it may well prove incapable of sustaining them. One cannot but think in this context of Nietzsche's warning that Christian morality could not long survive the passing of Christianity, that the rejection of Christian revelation must necessarily issue in the repudiation of the morality that had issued from that revelation, that apostasy from the Christian faith must necessarily be followed by apostasy from Christian morality.

In any case, I would suggest, that the foregoing analysis points toward two conclusions -- one about the past, the other about the future. The former consists in the central role played by the "Christian revolution" -- the

revolution in human self-understanding inaugurated by Christianity – in setting in motion the Western quest for freedom that looms so large in Western history. The latter is that there are serious reasons to wonder about the long-term sustainability of the political revolution set in motion by Christianity in our increasingly secularized, post-metaphysical, post-Christian cultural environment.