



FAITH & REASON

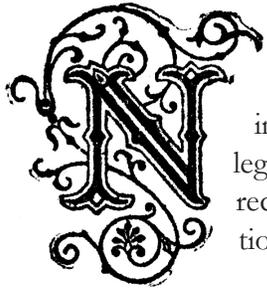
THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

1987 | Vol. XIII, No. 4

THE REAL BICENTENNIAL: NOTES ON THE CONTINUING QUEST FOR A THERAPY OF ORDER

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In this most interesting article, Dr. Donald D'Elia, who is no stranger to these pages, exposes the error that the Founding Fathers were generally atheists, agnostics or mere deists. He selects especially the thought of Dr. Benjamin Rush as an example of a person of deeply held Christian beliefs who understood the American experiment as having its roots in man seen as an image of God and the need for a "therapy of order" in accord with that view.



NO TASK IS MORE HERCULEAN IN THIS BICENTENNIAL YEAR THAN THAT OF cleansing the stable of American constitutional law and history. Like King Augaeas's oxen, mere positivistic legalities are thousandfold and breeding faster than we can keep track. Our only hope seems to lie in recovering the past, the true past of the American founding that was concerned with the timeless question of the order of being as a cause of right social and political order.¹

In these notes on the continuing quest for a "therapy of order" in American political society, the real meaning of the bicentennial of the United States Constitution, I would like to urge that we look more closely at the religio-political thought of 18th century Americans and Founding Fathers like Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), whom I have described elsewhere as the philosopher - or better, the theologian - of the American Revolution.² For Rush's "political science," his attempt to advance beyond opinion (doxa) to truth in Platonic and Voegelian terms, is more typical of the thought of the American founding than modern secularistic historians understand or concede.³ More books like M.E. Bradford's *A Worthy Company: Brief Lives of the Framers of the United States Constitution* (Marlborough, NH: Plymouth Rock Foundation, 1982) are needed to remind us of the larger philosophical and Judaeo-Christian origins of the American Republic.

America in 1786, superficial positivist historians must be reminded, was still a Christian civilization; and the overwhelming majority of people continued to think, if only unconsciously, in terms of the relation of the natural to the supernatural, of how man's supernatural condition influenced political theory.⁴ The pamphlets of the New England Calvinist clergy, for example, the "Black Regiment," show this abundantly. It is shamelessly unhistorical, laughably anachronistic, to represent American political thought in the late 18th century as naturalistic - as though most Americans were agnostics, skeptics, Deists, or atheists. Yet this is done all the time. The fact is that Rousseau had surprisingly little political influence on the Founding Fathers. Even Jefferson's appeal to the "natural rights" of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Declaration of Independence was understood then by the average person, and must still be understood, against the background of majority Christian belief at the time that our rights come from spirit rather than "nature" in the Jeffersonian and modern, positivistic sense and that - as virtually everyone in New England and elsewhere believed - natural law comes ultimately from divine law.⁵ The same was true of the Federal Constitution. It was not seen as an absolute but a relative - a means, not an end. Nature, in Romano Guardini's

powerful words, had not yet become autonomous.⁶

Dr. Benjamin Rush, like most people of his time and place, understood this because they still lived in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Whether they were articulate or not in expressing it, the American people knew with Proudhon and other thinkers that the problem of politics is essentially theological. The anthropology of the majority was Christian; and their anthropology was their sociology. The question of Job, “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” was answered by the formally educated or uneducated in the same manner. Man is made in the image and likeness of God. This was the only way to understand man’s telos and ultimate good. La Matrie’s “man as machine,” with its atheistic implications, was inconceivable to most people. Jefferson as a naturalistic thinker himself only managed to approach this modern conceit late in life and then at best tendentiously in the writings of Cabanis, de Tracy, and the French Ideologues.⁷ For the vast majority of 18th century Americans the idea of man was still biblical, “man as infinitely transcending man” (Pascal), man vis-a-vis God, man as somehow participating, living in God - in absolute Spirit; and therefore man’s rights were spiritual, God-given, not “natural” in the Deistic sense in which Jefferson used the word. In the Colonial colleges, in the parish schools and academies, at the knees of their mothers and fathers, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Americans were taught that God is above nature, that the ultimate source of law, of rights, of values lies beyond nature, which is the creature of God.⁸ The Founding Fathers were not pagans like Plato and Aristotle, concerned only with constructing the best polis: they recognized in some way the unique Christian tension between reason and Revelation in their political science.

The Declaration of Independence, it should be emphasized, carefully asserts about natural rights that “among these rights are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness (my italics).” In other words, there was explicit recognition at the time, duly observed by Jefferson, that there were many natural rights which belonged to the people, not just those mentioned in the text. The Ninth Amendment to the Federal Constitution confirms this: “The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.” The human person, in this pre-Hegelian Age, was rightly seen to be above process, above nature, above the state because he was made in the image and likeness of God. The United States Constitu-

tion likewise was neither a Rousseauian nor a Benthamite manifesto, today’s democratistic ideology notwithstanding. The “People” in the “We the People” of the preamble was rightly understood to be subject to Natural Law and its divine author. Orestes Brownson, after his conversion, saw this clearly in arguing that only the infallible Roman Catholic Church had the authority to interpret Natural Law.⁹ The Founding Fathers, of course, would have rejected Brownson’s conclusion out of hand; but the fact is that with few exceptions they believed in the biblical conception of the human person in which God - not some Protagorean “man” - is the measure of all things, including constitutions and governments.

What is man’s nature, according to Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and early America’s most influential physician and psychiatrist? What significance does man’s nature have for political, that is, existential order in the deepest sense of Plato’s - and derivatively, in our own day, Eric Voegelin’s - “therapy of order”? In his excellent study, “Existence in Tension: Man in Search of His Humanity,” John H. Hallowell emphasizes that for Plato and Voegelin philosophy is not a mere subject-matter but rather the “way,” the therapy to resist the pathology of disorder in ourselves and in society by rising above time and place and discovering what it means to be human.¹⁰ For Dr. Benjamin Rush, more a great Awakening thinker than an Enlightenment philosophe, men are “*theoeides* and *theoeikelon*, deiform and in the likeness of God.”¹¹ There is a “primordial conformity” between the *nous* of man and the divine ground of Being, and this is - in Rush’s Christian terms - the soul, which is made in the Image and likeness of God. This is man’s nature, his transcendent meaning. This is the key to Benjamin Rush’s religio-political thought on the American founding.

Rush’s own understanding of the disorientation of man and his social and political institutions in the 18th century, his doctrine of moral and social pathology, must be seen in the light of his biblical anthropology. America’s first psychiatrist eventually was to pronounce mankind mad. “The Scriptures speak of nations being drunk and of all the individuals of the human race being mad,” Rush wrote John Adams in September 1808. “What sober man or what man in his senses would think of walking in company or reasoning with either of them?”¹²

Historically, and more specifically, Rush’s Great Awakening background, his formation as a boy in the

“Schools of the Prophets” of Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Finley, and Samuel Davies, is an important and generally overlooked factor in Rush’s vision of the American Republic as the fulfillment of prophecy, the Kingdom of God on earth. His political thought, all his thought, was biblical, millennial, and Christocentric.¹³ And the same could be said for thousands of other leaders in the American Revolution, as Alan Heimert, in particular, has demonstrated.¹⁴ The other important factor in Rush’s “therapy of order” was Enlightenment science, although he was far from being a liberal in the accepted sense of the word as used to describe the *philosophes*.¹⁵ For Rush, fraternity was the end to which liberty and equality were means. More precisely, Rush was seeking in the tradition of Socrates, Plato, and St. Augustine to find a way out of the moral, social, and political chaos of man’s alienated condition through virtue - or, better, love.¹⁶

In Rush’s theocentric anthropology the ideal American Republic, which was the goal of all his Revolutionary thought and activity, must be constructed upon the supernatural virtue of love. This order of true fraternity, he believed, could only be attained in world-transcending Christian religious faith, which in his universalistic doctrine of personal and social salvation was happily compatible with Enlightenment science properly understood.¹⁷ In his vision of the millennial American Republic of love there must be, he insisted, social and political institutions that provided full institutionalization of access to transcendent Reality, to God. Otherwise there could be no “therapy of order.”¹⁸ Hence, the most important question for Rush, who is in the thick of the debate over the proposed Federal Constitution and the Bill of Rights, is the ontological and anthropological question of man, which becomes the religio-political question of the order that is consequent upon the great truth that man is made in the image and likeness of God. When this question is answered, we have arrived at the “therapy of order.”

Rush, again drawing from his scholastic background as a New Light Presbyterian, a Great Awakener at the College of New Jersey, sought to reconcile his Christian faith and Enlightenment science and philosophy. In this pre-millennial work, as Rush understood it, he was most influenced by the Lockean associationist and physico-theologian, David Hartley (1705- 1757), whose *Observations on Man* (1749) has much in common with St. Bonaventure’s 13th century classic *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. I have discussed the role of Hartley’s synthesis

of Christianity and associationist psychology in Rush’s physicotheological and reform thought elsewhere.¹⁹ Suffice it to say here that for Rush, Hartley, whom he called the “Newton” of Christian philosophy and a “saint of the first order,” had synthesized “physiology, metaphysics, and Christianity” and revealed God’s very plan for using natural means to restore wayward man to the Garden of Eden. This Paradise regained, Rush argued, was to be here in America, in what he called the “Christian Republic;” and the scientific mechanism for man’s restoration to grace, for the rehabilitation of his disordered sense of God and fraternal community (Hartley’s “theopathy”), was Lockean associationism illuminated and transfigured by divine Revelation.

This, in short, was Dr. Benjamin Rush’s “therapy of order” for America. The thesis helps explain Rush’s well-known positions on constitutionalism, especially with regard to the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 and the Federal Constitution. Insightful as it is, Rush cannot simply be described as an Old Whig or Commonwealthman.²⁰ A deeper analysis is required.

For example, Rush’s opposition to the Bill of Rights becomes intelligible once we realize that he consistently rejected any suggestion that man or his “natural rights” are autonomous. He believed, as our discussion above has implied, that man in every respect is derived *a posteriori* from an omnipotent, infinitely loving God acting through a material world external to man. As a Great Awakening thinker, and as a natural philosopher, Rush held to the doctrine of “continuous Creation,” in a long tradition of Christian thought going back to Jonathan Edwards in his own day, St. Peter Damian, and beyond. The Enlightenment (Jeffersonian) concept of nature, man, and culture as virtually self-dependent was unacceptable to him; and he did not interpret the Declaration of Independence (which he signed) in this way.²¹ Rights, for Rush, came directly from God - there is no mediation; therefore, governments, even that of the United States, ought not to encroach, however well-intentioned, upon the Deity’s precincts. And Rush’s implacable opposition to the legislative omnipotence of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 also takes on greater intelligibility when we realize the nature of his doctrine of man still alienated from God. “I should be afraid,” Rush wrote of the Constitution’s provision for a supreme legislature, “to commit my property, liberty and life to a body of angels for one whole year. The Supreme Being alone is qualified to possess supreme power over his creatures. It requires

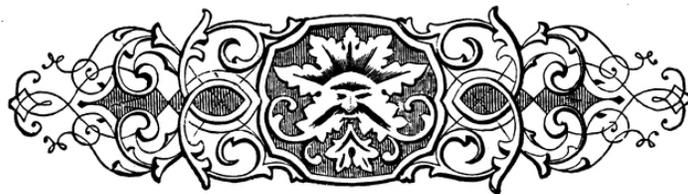
the wisdom and goodness of a Deity to control and direct it properly.”²²

A large number, probably a majority of the American people in the late 18th century, still believed with Rush, Plato and St. Augustine that virtue is a condition of knowledge. After 1776 even Deists like Jefferson believed that natural virtue was also the condition of American independence and freedom. Without the virtue of the American people and their governors, republican constitutions, however well-conceived and formulated, were thought to be worthless. Political society, the American people held with Aristotle, existed not simply for association (Gesellschaft) but for community (Gemeinschaft) - for virtue and “noble actions”²³ True social life, they knew, was potentiality, not actuality. Jefferson, even in his post-Christian manner, realized in his doctrine of the natural aristocracy of talent that government, that right order, required spiritual training and intellectual discipline.

Modern students in their essentially pagan analysis of the United States Constitution narrow the horizons of the Founding Fathers in their search for a therapy of order by failing to acknowledge the 18th century tension between reason and Revelation. In doing so, today’s

positivists and Benthamites falsify history and prefer the shadows of Plato’s cave to the reality of true philosophical questioning. Their “political science,” apart from Revelation, is - in the words of Plato and Voegelin - no science at all but a kind of “sorcery” that misidentifies reality, prohibits asking the questions that lead to true vision, and serves only the prevalent sensuous interests of the day rather than nous.²⁴ In refusing to see the founding of the United States and the Constitution in the light of the great anthropological and theological question - the question of Job - we are, to quote Voegelin again, “losing the question” and constructing with Hegel and Marx a gnostic system. When that happens, as the conduct of United States senators during the Bork confirmation hearings showed, the symbols of American constitutionalism become answers without questions, mere information.

For the Founding Fathers, the United States Constitution was no Promethean victory, no gnostic triumph, no demonic achievement of some abstract Rousseauian people. It was not meant as a utopian “second reality” (Robert Musil), but as a splendid recognition that man is dependent upon Reality. “We the People” are not autonomous but under God and His law.



NOTES

1The following discussion relies upon insights from Eric Voegelin’s monumental work, especially in his *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1968). I would like to thank Dr. Peter V. Sampo, *President of The Thomas More Institute of Liberal Arts*, for helping to introduce me to Eric Voegelin’s work.

2Benjamin Rush: *Philosopher of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1974) (Transactions, new ser., v. 64, part 5), *passim*.

3Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, p. 16, *et passim*.

4Heinrich A. Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1947, p. 59. Of the Framers of the United States Constitution, only five at most were not orthodox members of a Christian church, Bradford, *A Worthy Company*, p. viii.

5Rommen, pp. 62-63; Benjamin F. Wright, *American Interpretations of Natural Law: A Study in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), pp. 48-49, *et passim*. Essential is Edward S. Corwin, *The “Higher Law” Background of American Constitutional Law* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955).

6*The End of the Modern World*, edited with an Introduction by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1968).

7Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 61-62, *et passim*; on Jefferson and the French Ideologues, see D.J. D’Elia, “Jefferson, Rush, and the Limits of Philosophical Friendship,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 117 (October 1973), pp. 340-341.

8D.J. D'Elia, *The Spirits of '76: A Catholic Inquiry* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom College Press, 1983), pp. 24-26, et passim. The classic on *The Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic; Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges; a Neglected Chapter in the History of American Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1935) is by James J. Walsh. 9Wright, p. 274.

10In Stephen A. McKnight, ed., *Eric Voegelin's Search for Order in History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

11*The Republic*, p. 501b, quoted in Robert E. Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

12Quoted in D'Elia, *Benjamin Rush*, p. 105.

13Idem., *The Spirits of '76*, ch. ii, pp. 24-35.

14*Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), passim. Essential, too, is Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, 1961), I, pp. 322-350.

15Cf. Wilson C. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 5.

16See Howard M. Jones, *A Strange New World: American Culture in the Formative Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), esp. ch. ii.; and Heimert, passim.

17D.J. D'Elia, "The Republican Theology of Benjamin Rush," *Pennsylvania History*, 33 (April 1966), pp. 187-203.

18Idem., *The Spirits of '76*, ch. ii.

19"Dr. Benjamin Rush, David Hartley, and the Revolutionary Uses of Psychology," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 114, No. 2 (April 1970), pp. 109-118.

20Cf. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 358.

21D'Elia, *Benjamin Rush*, p. 87, et passim. For the contrast between Rush and Jefferson on man, nature, and culture, see my "Jefferson, Rush, and the Limits of Philosophical Friendship", passim.

22Observations upon the Present Government of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1777), p. 5. The book was published anonymously.

23*Politica*, trans. B. Jowett in *The Works of Aristotle*, translated into English under the editorship of W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), vol. 10, p. 1281a; excellent throughout for this famous distinction of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, and in general, is W. Stark, *The Sociology of Knowledge: An Essay in Aid of A Deeper Understanding of the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1958).

24See John H. Hallowell, ed., *Eric Voegelin: From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1975), passim.