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Christianity’s Epicurean Temptation

Marc D. Guerra

One of the more striking characteristics of Christianity is the remarkable resilience and flexibility the religion exhibits in the face of the kind of societal upheaval that necessarily accompanies fundamental political change. Beginning with its emergence within the Roman Empire, organized Christianity has not only survived but, to greater and lesser degrees, flourished under an extraordinarily wide range of political regimes. To cite only a few examples, the Christian religion has managed to accommodate itself to such diverse sociopolitical arrangements as the Roman Empire, medieval feudalism, the Holy Roman Empire, the Italian city-states, absolute monarchies, liberal democracies, and even, if only on the level of basic survival, atheistic communist states.

Christianity’s ability to accommodate itself to the sociopolitical arrangements of such fundamentally different regimes is, in large part, due to its inherently doctrinal nature. As a revealed religion, Christianity is finally less concerned with delineating a detailed moral-political code by which its followers are to lead their lives than it is with announcing “the Good News” of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. To be sure, the Christian religion does promulgate a law that includes a substantive moral teaching. But the goal of Christianity’s Law is the possession of eternal blessedness, not the juridical establishment of a specific sociopolitical program. Christianity in this respect stands in sharp contrast to the two other great revealed religions of the West, Judaism and Islam. Whereas it is adherence to their respective divine laws that marks the Jew and the Muslim as believers, Christianity initially comes to sight as a transpolitical “sound doctrine.” The community of Christian believers is bound together not by any comprehensive legal and social system, but rather by a shared belief in a set of revealed doctrines. Justification within Christianity therefore does not depend merely on the obligatory performance of legally sanctioned deeds, but on the purity and the steadfastness of a man’s faith.

Precisely because they recognized the gospel’s emphasis on the salvific role of
faith, Christianity’s early intellectual caretakers understood that the Sacred Scriptures were in need of further theological refinement. The church fathers recognized that since human beings were to be judged on the purity of their faith, what has been revealed about God must be rendered as accurately and lucidly as possible. Viewed from this perspective, Christianity’s failure to provide either its own paradigm for the correct ordering of society or to endorse any existing set of arrangements is a direct consequence of its transpolitical nature.

Recently, however, a number of Christian thinkers have provocatively questioned the legitimacy of the modern liberal regime. Liberal democracy has been increasingly criticized not only for failing to support but also for actually eroding the intellectual grounds on which the Christian faith is based. This argument is forcefully advanced in Kenneth R. Craycraft’s engaging and, at times, jarring new book *The American Myth of Religious Freedom.* A former professor of theology at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio who is presently a student at the Law School at Duke University, Craycraft here “sets out” to deconstruct “the idea” of religious freedom in order to expose its “radically secular” roots.

It should be clear from the foregoing remarks that the argument of *The American Myth of Religious Freedom* clearly falls outside of the familiar parameters of mainstream religious and political thought. While the book’s title suggests that the work is concerned primarily with the American understanding of religious freedom, its author advances an argument that is in truth directed not at America or even the “liberal American idea” of religious freedom, but rather at the principle of liberalism itself. Kenneth Craycraft’s engaging book, in other words, challenges the reader to consider the kind of untimely religious critique of liberalism that characterized the Catholic Church’s discourse for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The “Irreligion” of Religious Freedom

*The American Myth of Religious Freedom* begins with a discussion of how pervasive “belief” in the idea of religious freedom is in present-day political discourse. Craycraft, using the language of postmodern literary theory, repeatedly refers to the idea of religious liberty as a “myth.” The impact this “powerful formative myth” has had and continues to have on the American psyche cannot be exaggerated for Craycraft. On the one hand, “the myth” of religious freedom originally served a “creative purpose” in the American regime. By articulating “a set of symbols, rites, institutions, and stories that . . . reflect how [the American people would] see the world,” it provided them with “a common story.” On the other hand, the power of this myth remains formative inasmuch as it continues to “create” the “mindset . . . and prejudices” of future generations of American citizens. The American myth of religious freedom paradoxically perpetuates itself and the regime it helped found. For Craycraft, the effect of this myth is so strong that even those who claim that the American regime was founded on Christian
principles typically cling to an "unquestioned belief" in the principle of religious liberty. Insofar as conservative-minded Americans think of themselves as Americans, they implicitly and inescapably "testify" to the truth of this myth.

Craycraft's analysis of the pervasiveness of belief in religious liberty in America is for the most part correct. But, as we shall see, Craycraft's postmodern reduction of "the idea" of religious freedom to mere myth does not do justice to the partial truth that is contained in this idea. For postmodernism's literary method of mythological analysis dogmatically assumes that the idea of religious liberty can be reduced to mere ideology. The flaw in Craycraft's postmodern approach, in other words, is that it is methodologically incapable of taking seriously the possibility that there is a considered thoughtfulness behind the political idea of religious liberty.

Be that as it may, for Craycraft the problem with the myth of religious freedom is that followed to its logical conclusion it "undermines . . . belief in Christianity defined in any interesting way." That Craycraft is aware of the theoretical problem the liberal principle of religious freedom poses to Christianity shows he has thought about the relation of liberalism to Christianity more seriously than the majority of contemporary Christian theologians and political scientists. Rather than simply accepting religious freedom as an unqualified good for religion, Craycraft has taken the time to think through the argument behind that theory. Craycraft is thus aware of the principle's original intentions as well as its actual implications.

The "liberal theory of religious freedom" institutionalizes the practice of religious liberty by raising it up to the level of a universal principle. Consequently, it first presents itself as a good not only for the political order but for religion as well. To begin with, the theory has the obvious, salutary effect of curbing the threat that human beings will be persecuted solely on religious grounds. Given the bloodied history of religious strife that characterized life in early post-Reformation Europe, the fact that public-spirited political thinkers sought to find an arrangement that could lessen the likelihood of such conflict is more than understandable. What is more, the theory of religious liberty seems to benefit religious practice as well. The adherence to the religion of one's own choosing would appear to represent a deeper commitment to one's faith. Thus, on the surface, the type of religion practiced under the principle of religious freedom seems to be more pure, if only because it reflects "the authentically free" choice of the "unencumbered self." But as Craycraft explains over several chapters, behind the theory's salutary interest in the health of religious practice lies an implicit, willful rejection of the truth of religion in general and of any one religion in particular. While not saying so directly, Craycraft here draws on the ground-breaking work of the twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss in retracing how the chief architect of the theory of religious liberty, John Locke, sought to move religion out of the public sphere and relegate it to the private realm of civil society. As Craycraft repeatedly observes, for Locke the place of religion in society "is the first problem of political theory and practice." Craycraft's ahistorical genealogy, however, fails to acknowledge any legitimate historical or political basis for this concern in the early
modern period. Craycraft goes so far as to claim that the motivation behind the theory had “nothing to do with social or historical expediency and everything to do with a particular moral, religious, and political theory.” In contrast to mainline political theorists who view the Two Treatise of Government as Locke’s most influential work, Craycraft takes A Letter Concerning Toleration to be his “most important contribution to . . . modern political theory.”

In the Letter, Locke extrapolates from his argument about life within “the hypothetical state of nature” the moral and religious principles that the modern state would use to go about “privatizing religious belief.” Building on the anthropology of Thomas Hobbes, which grounds political life on a pre-moral fact, namely, man’s fear of a violent death at the hands of another, Locke identified the desire for “comfortable self-preservation” as the true grounds of civil society. Locke thus derived from this pre-moral fact the further conclusion “that religion is something one chooses from a position of moral, social, and religious autonomy.” As Craycraft’s argument shows, the reason why Locke’s theory could require that religious belief be privatized—that is, that religious belief has no explicit role to play in public life—was because Locke was “openly indifferent” to the various truth claims that separated religions. The animating concern of “liberalism’s Lockean theory of religious liberty” is thus neither philosophical nor theological, but overtly political. Locke’s principal aim was to secure a peaceful arrangement among religions by according them all the same degree of freedom and political status, and thus “relativizing” all religious belief. In securing such an arrangement, liberalism proudly, and as Craycraft notes, falsely claims to have solved the theoretically irresolvable “theologico-political problem.” Far from having the best interests of religion in mind, Locke’s principle of religious toleration presented the liberal state with a time bomb designed to “privatize and marginalize orthodox” religious belief.

Liberalism’s theory of religious freedom is thus, according to Craycraft, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It feigns a concern for the well-being of religious belief but in fact employs a fictive anthropology to liberate man from what it sees as the tyrannical hold of religious belief. Craycraft develops this point at length in the book’s final chapter, titled “There’s No Such Thing as Religious Freedom, and It’s No Big Deal.” As the chapter’s title suggests, Craycraft here follows the lead of the postmodern literary theorist Stanley Fish. What Craycraft successfully brings to light is the typically overlooked fact that the theory of religious freedom is actually only a part, albeit an important one, of the larger “project of liberalism.” Indeed, despite what the title of his book suggests, the true target of Craycraft’s criticism is not the American idea of religious freedom or the practice of religious liberty, but liberalism itself. In particular, Craycraft objects to liberalism’s claim to have “found a set of objective, neutral principles, by which objective universal judgments can be made.”

The real strength of Craycraft’s critique rests on his undeveloped recognition that the liberal regime poses a new type of challenge to the integrity of Christianity. Craycraft understands that American liberal democracy is something new under the
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sun—it is not merely a variation of the ancient republican model. In fact, for all practical purposes, modern liberal democracy is incapable of being understood simply within the framework of the more or less legitimate regimes traditionally articulated by Aristotelian political science. Because it raises the principle of democracy, consent, to the level of the single legitimizing principle in human life, liberal democracy effectively breaks with the sempiternal natural cycle of regimes set forth in Aristotle’s *Politics*. Compared to modern liberal democracy, Periclean Athens and republican Rome were both aristocratic regimes. As the great analyst of democracy Alexis de Tocqueville observed, the predemocratic and democratic worlds differ “almost in kind.” Consequently, the types of men that each world tends to produce “are like two distinct orders of human beings, each of which has its own merits and defects, its own advantages and its own evils.”

In Craycraft’s view, the effectual truth of the liberal regime’s relation to religion is that it seeks to establish “irreligion as the official state-endorse[d] religious opinion.” The liberal regime’s emphasis on consent has the effect of calling into question not only the transpolitical claim of Christian faith, as every regime does, but also the very ground on which this transpolitical claim is made. In an unsubtle and heavy-handed chapter titled “From Theory to Practice: Madison and Jefferson,” Craycraft argues that the “great task” of establishing irreligion as the official state religion of America was taken up by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Through a process of “literary genealogy,” Craycraft tries to show how these two “great practitioners” of Locke went about “enshrining” his antireligious doctrine in the First Amendment. Craycraft here paints with extremely broad and often misleading strokes; he too easily identifies or perhaps reduces both Jefferson and Madison to Locke and thus overstates the element of genuinely Lockean thought in the American founding. Thus, in making his case against liberalism’s theory of religious liberty, Craycraft refuses to be deterred by stubborn facts such as Jefferson’s description of the Declaration of Independence “as an expression of the American mind” and not just of his own thought. Likewise, Craycraft is unwilling to admit that while it is not wholly Christian, Madison’s moving account of liberty and conscience in the *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments* is in some sense indebted to the Christian understanding of these things.

Craycraft’s exaggerated account of the Lockean dimension of the American founding explains why he views the Supreme Court’s decision on the strict separation of church and state in *Eversen v. Board of Education* (1947) as accurately reflecting the framers’ position. For Craycraft, religious conservatives who think the Court’s decision woefully distorted the framers’ argument on church-state relations typically make the mistake of identifying the religious sentiment of the general population at the time of the founding with the stance of the founders themselves:

Now it is probably unarguable that the broadly popular sentiment at the time of the American Founding was that the state ought to protect religious freedom . . . but to claim that the intention of the Constitution
of the United States is to protect religion from the state rather than the state from religion is simple legal and historical fiction. 17

Over and against the vacuity of the liberal theory of religious freedom, Craycraft holds up the “authentic grounds of religious freedom” articulated in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty. Like the liberal myth of religious freedom, the council’s Declaration also attempts to establish “a full range of religious freedom” for all human beings. But in contrast to the groundless character of the liberal notion of religious freedom, the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching is able to provide a solid basis for this freedom by reserving “the highest order of freedom for itself as Church.” The Declaration on Religious Liberty does this by carving out for the church a particular kind of freedom, one that is grounded in its “distinct right” as the repository of religious and moral truth. As the unique repository of Christ’s revelation, the freedom that the church exercises supersedes the freedom possessed by the non-Christian.

Craycraft is undoubtedly right to draw attention to the fact that the Vatican Council’s Declaration provides the principle of religious liberty with a truer, more solid foundation than its impoverished Lockean counterpart. But again it must be pointed out that Craycraft provides a rather one-sided and simplistic reading of the history of religion in America. On the basis of reading Craycraft, for example, one would get the impression that the American Revolution was explicitly and unapologetically atheistic. But this simply is not the case. In contrast to the vitriolic antireligious spirit of the French Revolution, the American Revolution demonstrated a greater openness to and respect for religion. Furthermore, while the heterodox nature of Madison’s and Jefferson’s religious beliefs has been recognized for some time now, the same cannot be said of all of the founders—something Craycraft’s argument implies. Craycraft simply ignores or thinks unimportant the fact that while the founding fathers may not have been “orthodox Christians” (an ambiguous phrase that Craycraft in the end appears to identify with Catholics), the majority were in fact Christians of some sort. Craycraft’s argument simply cannot account for the role played in the founding by mainline Protestants such as James Wilson or even those Unitarians who believed in a providential, Creator God. Simply put, what Craycraft refuses to recognize is that not all of the founders worshipped at the altar of modern rationalist philosophy.

Along similar lines, Craycraft’s effort to reduce the history of religion in America to the effects of Madison’s and Jefferson’s Lockeanism is also misplaced. The actual history of religion in America is far more complex. Craycraft has a tendency to overstate the degree to which political life, even modern political life, can be understood simply as the application of theory to practice. Craycraft consequently never takes seriously the possibility that the American founders may have arrived at a prudential practical solution to the problem of religious belief. A more accurate and more subtle appraisal of the American regime would have to acknowledge that America’s lived history of religion is richer than the regime’s partially Lockean theory. In short, what he fails to realize is that the American
regime’s *prudential* accommodation of religious belief defies any purely theoretical account.

Craycraft toys with, but finally rejects, this possibility in a provocative chapter titled “Catholic Irony? John Courtney Murray on Religious Freedom.” Taking his cue from Peter Augustine Lawler’s original reading of *We Hold These Truths*, Craycraft here offers a similar, and in some sense derivative, reading of Murray’s famous book. Craycraft’s purpose is to show that Murray’s famed “reconciliation” between the moral and religious demands of Christianity and the principles of American democracy is “ironic.” Craycraft, rightly it seems to me, sees the interpretive key for understanding the argument of *We Hold These Truths* as being revealed in Murray’s remark in the introduction that

> the question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent; for the matter of its position inverts the order of values. It must, of course, be turned round to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism.

Craycraft here sets forth a compelling case that Murray was not as unaware of the non-Christian, and especially non-Catholic, elements in the American founding as he is commonly thought to have been. Whereas conventional wisdom sees Murray as trying to accommodate Catholic teaching to the political principles set forth in the *Declaration*, Craycraft argues that precisely the opposite is true. Far from attempting to forge some type of synthesis between the two, or suggesting that Catholic thought could deepen or prudently elevate Jefferson’s thought, Craycraft’s Murray actually “rejected” America’s constitutional understanding of religion “out of hand.” For Craycraft, “Murray [was] not accepting the essential philosophy of Jefferson and improving it with a little Catholic theology.” Rather, he was trying to offer “a distinctively Christian understanding of how a Christian can live in America.”

Craycraft is right to call attention to the elegance and subtlety of the argument of *We Hold These Truths*. But he errs inasmuch as he mistakes Murray’s subtlety for “irony.” Murray’s argument is not fueled by the kind of postmodern irony that delights in hiding the fact that it “rejects” the American principles “out of hand,” but rather by the kind of theoretical-practical sobriety that seeks to moderate the excesses of American democracy from within. As Lawler points out, Murray’s true genius consisted in his recognition that as a *political* act, the American founding finally could not claim theoretical coherence. Murray recognized that despite all efforts to the contrary, the various moral, religious, and political principles articulated in the American founding did not, and could not, form a theoretically coherent whole—hence Jefferson spoke of “the American mind” and not the “American philosophy.” This then explains why Murray affirmed a tension at the heart of the founding between “a voluntarist idea of law as will” and “a tradition of natural law as inheritance . . . as an . . . intellectualist idea.” The problem of radical autonomy or liberty severed from any end that plagues America
today was thus “a possibility . . . inherent from the beginning.” What Craycraft fails to appreciate, in other words, is that Murray’s way of writing has more in common with the sophisticated moderation of a Burke than with the diletantish irony of the postmodernist.

What are we thus to make of the fact that Murray chose subtly to elevate America’s liberal principles whereas Craycraft chooses to shout his rejection of these principles from the rooftop? Does not Murray’s choice to moderate the American regime from within say something profound about his understanding of the relation of the Christian to the regime in which he lives? Conversely, does not Craycraft’s refusal to use the same kind of politically responsible or prudent rhetoric finally suggest something entirely different?

This brings us to the real flaw in Craycraft’s argument. The fundamental problem with Craycraft’s book is not in its hyperbolic claim that Christians ought not accept “the principles of the American Founding” nor in its odd suggestion that the “degeneration” of the “liberty of constitutionalism . . . is not . . . important to Christians.” Such remarks, no matter how politically irresponsible, are in the end only the products of Craycraft’s remarkable belief that Christians actually have no genuine stake in political life. The reason why Craycraft can claim that the nonexistence of religious liberty is “no big deal” is actually because he believes that citizenship has no real role to play in the life of the Christian.

Christianity is, for Craycraft, not merely transpolitical but in fact radically apolitical. Christians consequently have “no real stake” in the political order. Nor, for that matter, do they have any interest in “changing it in any fundamental way.” Quite the contrary, the Christian’s only real “interest is . . . to persuade people to believe by witnessing to the resurrection of Christ, who . . . relativizes all political theories and who commands that people bind themselves to no one.”

What is startling about Craycraft’s claim is the remarkable similarity it bears to the atheistic doctrine of Epicurus. Like Epicureanism, Craycraft’s position does more than simply deprecate the importance of political life. Craycraft does not limit himself to saying that Christians should not be consumed by political life, but rather that they have “no real stake” or “interest” in it. Christians’ concerns with political life are solely negative; it should not disturb or interfere with their own private concerns. Craycraft, for all practical purposes, agrees with the description of the Christian that the anti-Christian Rousseau offers in the penultimate chapter of the Social Contract: he is a citizen only in the most attenuated sense of the term.

Craycraft’s apolitical stance explains why he fails to articulate any positive political vision. Strictly speaking, Craycraft’s argument is neither genuinely conservative, since there is nothing in liberalism he wants to preserve, nor authentically reactionary, since he does not call for a return to an earlier form of clerical politics. It is rather entirely critical. For Craycraft, what matters is only that Christians be allowed to live their lives as Christians.

Paradoxically, by not addressing the question of citizenship, Craycraft departs from the very tradition of Christian political reflection he sees himself upholding. Christianity traditionally has recognized that because of its doctrinal nature it must
look outside of itself for its political form. But with this realization comes a challenge. How does one account for Christian participation in political life if human beings ultimately are ordered to a good that transcends the political? Generally speaking, Christianity has offered two types of responses to this question, the Augustinian and the Thomistic. By offering a brief sketch of these two positions, we bring into sharper focus the distinctively Christian reasons for rejecting Craycraft’s call for apolitical withdrawal.

The Two Poles of Christian Citizenship

The complicated relationship Christianity has to political life had become apparent as early as one century after Christ’s death. The anonymous Letter to Diognetus, for example, describes Christians as “aliens” for whom “every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land since . . . [their] true citizenship is in heaven.” Despite this fact, Christians ought to “live in their own countries . . . have a share in everything as citizens and . . . obey the established laws.”

But as the overall argument of the Letter to Diognetus makes clear, it is taken for granted that the Christian faithful would participate in political life. The author of the Letter thus does not attempt to give any particular reason why Christians would or should participate in politics. The Christian thinker who would be the first to take up this argument in a serious way was St. Augustine.

It is of no small significance that St. Augustine formulated his teaching about the actual grounds of Christian citizenship precisely at the time when Christianity was being blamed for the inglorious sacking of Rome by Alaric and the Goths. St. Augustine himself states in his Retractationes that he was first moved to write The City of God out of a desire to defend Christianity from this charge.

St. Augustine’s famous argument that the day-to-day life of the Christian is marked by a kind of dual citizenship in which he is at one and the same time a member of the “City of Man” and a citizen of the “City of God” is based on his reading of chapter 13 of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. St. Paul, there, asserts that the Christian, who views God as his highest authority, must also be obedient to civil authorities, since God has appointed them as His political ministers on earth.

Through temporal rulers, God makes use of civil society as a coercive means for controlling, or at least lessening, the effects of evil in the world. What is more, God has entrusted temporal rulers with the care of those material goods that all human beings, the Christian and non-Christian, need to make their way in this life. In contrast to the majority of men, the Christian does not obey the temporal ruler simply out of fear that he might be punished. Quite the contrary, the Christian
views his relation to the political authority “positively” and thus looks on his “political obligations” as something approximating a religious duty.  

There is, however, for St. Augustine a still deeper reason why Christians are to take part in political life. Ultimately the political actions the Christian performs as a citizen are “rooted” in the demands of the theological virtue of charity. Christianity’s injunction that one should love one’s neighbor as himself—the exact opposite of the asocial injunction of Epicureanism—meant that the Christian was obligated to devote himself to the good of his fellow citizen with an intensity that had yet to be seen in the ancient world. The virtue of charity required that if one truly was to love God one also had to love all those who God wants to be saved. But St. Augustine, also, was aware that if such love was to mean anything it could not simply take the form of an abstract love of humanity. St. Augustine thus spoke of “the order of charity,” which extends from those in one’s immediate family up through and including those fellow members of one’s political community. In practical terms, “the order of charity” meant that while the gospel charged that “all men were to be loved equally,” one principally has to care for those men “who are most closely bound to you by place, time, or opportunity.” There was, for St. Augustine, a charitable reason then to defend civilization against barbarism, to side with the vices of the Romans over against the savageness of the Goths. The virtue of charity, in other words, obliged the Christian to care for his fellow citizen’s physical and psychic well-being, to care for him “as a whole embracing both a soul and a body.”  

The actual ground of Christian citizenship would thus find its first, and arguably most explicitly theological, articulation in St. Augustine’s thought. For St. Augustine, Christianity was able to transform the classical notion of citizenship by raising it to the level of a religious duty. By so doing, it effectively revealed that nothing else was capable of producing such provincial administrators, such husbands, such wives, such parents, such sons, such masters, such slaves, such kings, such judges, and finally such tax-payers and collectors of public revenue as Christian teaching requires them to be, and let them dare say this teaching is opposed to the welfare of the state, or, rather, let them even hesitate to admit that it is the greatest safety of the state.

St. Thomas, who in contrast to St. Augustine lived within a recognizably Christian social order, approached the question of Christian citizenship from a different direction. Whereas St. Augustine spoke of citizenship in terms of its charitable foundations, St. Thomas, following Aristotle, viewed politics as being an essential part of human life. St. Thomas, unlike St. Augustine, could therefore view political life as natural to man. “Man,” St. Thomas affirmed, is “by nature both a social and political animal.”

However, while man is the most social and political of all animals, he is also the most physically needy. And it is this fact that first inclines him to live in society. By nature, the first society to which man belongs is the family or “the household.”
Yet the good of the family is at best only “a partial good,” since its principle aim is the procurement of those goods that allow for and sustain life. But even the family, ruled as it is by economics or the art of household management, is incapable of securing all the goods human beings need to survive. Consequently, St. Thomas saw the family as being completed by the political community, which being the greater and the more perfect community both incorporates and subsumes all lesser communities to its own end. 38

But because he is also a rational animal, it is not sufficient merely that man “lives, but that he lives well.”39 Indeed, as St. Thomas states in his discussion of the natural law, man’s distinctively human natural inclination inclines him both “to know the truth and to live in society.”40 Once again following Aristotle, St. Thomas believed that such genuine human flourishing could occur only within the political community, “the most perfect of all human societies.”41 Unlike the household, the political community attains a level of self-sufficiency. But what is more important, however, is that while the end of the family is the promotion of life, the end of the political community is the cultivation of virtue in human beings. And this elevated good is “common” to all citizens. St. Thomas in fact bases his notion of citizenship on the recognition that the type of virtue that develops from engaging in such activities as self-rule or ruling and being ruled in turn are important parts of any genuinely human life. The good habits instilled in those who live under well-ordered and just laws, something that takes on slightly greater importance in Christianity given its transpolitical claim, represent authentic human goods. As a result, St. Thomas views the common good as constituting the “proper,” over and against the merely private, good of the citizen.42 To be sure, St. Thomas believed that the kind of natural perfection that citizenship cultivates is inferior to the supernatural perfection that can come about only through the reception of God’s grace. But insofar as grace does not destroy but perfects nature, it remains true that man’s spiritual perfection does not negate the legitimate, natural perfection that occurs within political life. Thus, for St. Thomas, only the man who is “depraved, a beast as it were . . . or the man who is better than a man, a god as it were,” is capable of living outside of civil society. 43

Conclusion

Despite his argument to the contrary, Craycraft admits that Christians cannot simply withdraw from political life. How else can one explain why he has taken the time to write a work of political theory that passionately warns Christians about the theological dangers of liberalism. This inconsistency in fact points to the real source of his objection to the liberal regime. On the surface, Craycraft faults liberalism for falsely believing that it has found a solution to the theologico-political problem. The liberal regime, however, can make this claim only by denying the tension that persists between the requirements of political life and the duties of religious belief. But in his own way, Craycraft wants to do the same thing. In the
final analysis, what he objects to is the fact that the liberal regime refuses to acknowledge the authority and the primacy of the truths contained in Christian revelation. Stated differently, Craycraft is critical of the liberal political order precisely because it fails to take "the truth claim" of Christianity seriously. But what Craycraft's criticism fails, or is perhaps unwilling, to recognize is that the political order can only look at religion from the perspective of the political order. To acknowledge this point is not to reduce all faiths to civil religions or to view them solely in terms of their utility. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that the political order as the political order has nothing to say about the truth of a particular religion. To expect more than this from the political order, which is what Craycraft repeatedly does, is to assume that the theologicopolitical problem can be solved. What Craycraft seems to call for is for the political order to be ruled by a philosopher-king, or a theologian-king, who divines the truths of a religion and structures the entire political community around them. This is ultimately what it would mean to have a political community that both embodies and upholds the principles of religious liberty set forth in the Vatican Council's Declaration. And it goes without saying that such an arrangement requires one to go far beyond the requirements and limits of the order of charity.

What is most regrettable about Craycraft's extremist apolitical conclusions is that they will allow some critics to overlook the important question about the relationship between Christianity and liberal democracy that his book raises. The analysis of the origins and ends of the liberal regime in The American Myth of Religious Freedom should raise troubling questions for those Christians who dogmatically assume that liberal democracy is the only form of government compatible with Christianity. But regrettably, by framing his question in such a polarizing way—should Christianity endorse liberal democracy or reject it?—Craycraft only succeeds in obfuscating the fact that Christianity's original rapprochement with liberal democracy was prudential.

Craycraft's book demonstrates that what Christianity most needs today is political theorists and theologians who neither uncritically celebrate liberal democracy nor reject it out of hand. Contemporary Christianity is best served by theologians and political theorists who retain a certain critical distance from liberal democracy, even as they praise its virtues and possibilities. The merit of such thinkers is that they affirm the decency of liberal democracy and its various attendant goods: civic peace, religious freedom, self-government, constitutionalism, while refusing to make idols of them. Such critical friends of liberal democracy are profoundly aware of the fact that liberty worthy of the name must be ordered liberty. The Christian political theorist or theologian, in other words, is presently called on to perform the necessary and salutary task of reminding liberal democracy about something it once knew—that it relies on inherited extrademocratic goods, such as religion and morality, for its health and survival.
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Notes

1. See 1 Tim. 1:10. Commenting on the revolutionary impact this phenomenon had on the sociopolitical order, the great nineteenth-century historian Fustel de Coulanges insightfully observed that with the emergence of Christianity “the idea which men had of the duties of the citizens were modified. The first duty no longer consisted in giving one’s time, one’s strength, one’s life to the state. Politics and war were no longer the whole of man; all the virtues were no longer comprised in patriotism, for the soul no longer had a country. Man felt that he had other obligations besides that of living and dying for the city. Christianity distinguished the private from the public virtues. By giving less honor to the latter, it elevated the former. It placed God, the family, the human individual above the country, the neighbor above the city” (The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991], 387).


19. John Courtney Murray, We Hold These Truths (Kansas City, Kans.: Sheed and Ward, 1988), ix-x.

20. Craycraft, The American Myth, 187. Craycraft here parts company with Lawler, who limits himself to making the more moderate claim that Murray was subtly trying to bring Jefferson’s thought more in line with the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. See Lawler, “Murray’s Articulation,” 118. For Lawler, Murray was consciously trying to deepen and transform what was morally, religiously, and politically undesirable in the American founding in order to preserve the desirable elements of the founding that were already there from the start.
21. Given the argument of Craycraft's book, perhaps no passage makes this point more clearly than Murray's observation that "the authors of the Federalist papers were not engaged in broaching a political theory universal in scope and application, a plan for an Ideal Republic of Truth and Virtue. They were arguing for a particular Constitution... It is in the tone of this tradition of American political writing that one should argue for the First Amendment. ... Perhaps they will not satisfy the American doctrinaire, the theologizer" (We Hold These Truths, 77).

22. Murray, We Hold These Truths, 41.
23. Murray, We Hold These Truths, 41.
29. St. Augustine, The Retractationes, 2.43.1.
30. St. Augustine makes clear, however, that such obedience is no longer obligated if the political authority authorizes the Christian to do something that is destructive of his faith. "So far as the life of mortals is concerned, which is spent and ended in a few days, what does it matter under whose rule a man is going to die, as long as those who govern do not force him to impiety and iniquity" (St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. Henry Bettenson [New York: Penguin Books, 1986], 5.17).
31. For St. Augustine, the Christian's true obedience to the political authority stands in sharp contrast to the "performative" obedience of the philosopher who also orients his life to a transpolitical good. Speaking of Seneca, for example, St. Augustine remarks that "doubtless philosophy had taught him an important lesson, that he should not be superstitious in his conception of the physical universe; but because of the laws of the country and the accepted customs, also learnt that without playing an actor's part in theatrical fictions, he should imitate such a performance in the temple" (The City of God, 6.11).
32. St. Augustine, Expositio quarundam propositionum ex epistula ad Romanos, 74.
36. There is one kind of political action that proves to be a noticeable and important exception to this rule, namely, St. Thomas's account of the conduction of a just war. St. Thomas does not set forth the guidelines for the conducting of a just war in terms of nature or natural virtue but in terms of the requirements of the theological virtue of charity. The waging of war seems to point to the limits of the natural grounding of political action for St. Thomas. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 2-2.40. Thus, for St. Thomas, what is imperative in fighting a just war is the "purity" of one's peace-loving intentions as well as the justice of one's punitive intentions. We should point out that the traditional notion that the Christian waging of a just war is done out of a just intention to punish an unjust party has all but been forgotten. Contemporary Christian legal theorists such as John Finnis have gone out of their way in recent years to obscure and deny the fact that Christianity has historically viewed just wars not a just efforts of self-defense but principally as means of enforcing punitive just third-party interventions. See John Finnis, "The Ethics of War and Peace in the

37. St. Thomas Aquinas, On Kingship, To the King of Cyprus, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, intro. Ignatius Karl Theodore Eschmann (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982), 1.4. It must be noticed, however, that St. Thomas’s statement that man is both social and political points in the direction of his eventual departure from a strictly Aristotelian teaching. St. Thomas emphasizes the social dimension of human life to draw attention to the variegated character of human sociability. In short, St. Thomas finally is more concerned with defending the pluralism of the medieval Christian order than with simply defending the uniquely political character of the Greek polis.

38. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1-2.90.3. ad. 3m.


40. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 1-2.94.2.


42. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 2-2.47.10. ad.2m.

43. St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics, 1, lecture 1, no. 39.

44. The same mistake is made in a much less sophisticated way by Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson in their recent book Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America (New York: Zondervan, 1999).