

On 'Left Integralism': Catholic Social Teaching as a Political Theology

John Milbank

1. The return of Integralism

Today, there is both a renewed historical debate about the political impact of Catholicism in modern times and a renewed questioning of the precise meaning of modern Catholic social teaching.

The historical debate concerns the degree to which, and the way in which the Catholic Church supposedly came to terms with liberal democracy during the course of the Nineteenth

and Twentieth Centuries.¹ The theoretical debate concerns both that issue and the normative question of whether this coming to terms is theologically acceptable.²

In both cases, the new debate is prompted by an awareness that secular culture is increasingly departing from Christian and traditional ethical norms, in a way that was not anticipated in the rather too complacent mid-Twentieth Century. Suddenly, historians have become aware of the way in which Christianity continued to shape our social and political culture even up to the Nineteen-Sixties, before the successive and linked triumphs of the sexual revolution and neoliberalism. Equivalently, philosophers and theologians have become alert to the manner in

¹ See, recently, Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia PA: Pennsylvania UP, 2015); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2018); Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2019); Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2019); Bernt T. Oftestad, *The Catholic Church and Liberal Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2019); Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth Century French Politics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2021); And also earlier, Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialisation to the First World War* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992).

² See Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity?' in *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: OUP, 1999), ed James L. Heft 13-37 and 'A Catholic Modernity 25 Years On' in *Modernity and Transcendence: A Dialogue with Charles Taylor*, ed. A.J. Carroll and S. Hellemans (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2021), 180-205; Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2012); Edmund Waldstein, 'An Integralist Manifesto' in *First Things*, 1 October, 2017 and 'What is Integralism Today?' in *Church Life Journal*, October 31, 2018; Jean-Luc Marion, *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago IL: Chicago UP, 2021) [French original 2017]; Andrew Willard Jones, *The Two Cities: A History of Christian Politics* (Steubenville OH: Emmaus Road, 2021), 175-347; Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: editiones scholasticae, 2020) Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Schindler, *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville OH: New Polity Press, 2021); Adrian Vermuele, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).

which the prevailing liberal culture wishes to secularise also the individual, and to wrest her away from the norms of both nature and cultural tradition, in order to recommend a ceaseless narcissistic self-creation. Since it has turned out that the loss of Christian influence appears to have resulted in a loss of social solidarity, while the privatisation of religion after all offers no security of religious flourishing or even religious tolerance, it becomes natural to ask, historically, whether the total triumph of a liberal and secular modernity is more recent than we have tended to suppose, besides whether such a total triumph is truly acceptable to Christians. To put the issue abruptly: if liberal democracy now seems to encourage perverse and Sadeian views about sex, gender, life, death, pleasure and transaction, then can we now be so sure that the Catholic embrace of liberal democracy – assuming, for the moment, this ever really occurred – was altogether a good thing?³

It is for this reason that we are today witnessing the return of Catholic integralism amongst several prominent theorists. These thinkers, whom I want to describe as ‘right integralists’ (see further below), insist on the ultimate authority of the Church over secular affairs, the non-separation of Church and State and the relative lack of rights for proponents of religious error. They continue to be opposed by those Christians who accept the full autonomy of the political realm, embrace a complete separation of Church and State and understand religious freedom in terms of the right of the private conscience to liberty of opinion.

The main point which I wish to make about this ideological divide is to point out a crucial irony. Without exception, the ‘right integralists’ espouse also a return to neo-scholasticism (a Thomism variously corrupted by the subterranean or conscious influences of Scotus,

³ See Dany-Robert Dufour, *La Cité Perverse: Libéralisme et pornographie* (Paris: Denoel, 2009).

Ockham, Cajetan, Suarez and Poinsoot among many others) which upholds a ‘layer-cake’ model of nature and grace, according to which there are not just various natural ends, as for Aquinas, but also a single natural end of flourishing in this life, which exists in principle entirely independently of revealed, supernatural, ultimate beatitude.⁴ In other words, it is curiously the ‘integralists’ who refuse an ‘integrated’ understanding of nature and grace, according to which human nature has an inherent and dynamic instinct for the supernatural, even though this can only be received as a gift, just as human beings can only fulfil their erotic desires through the grant of another. By this same token of integration, nothing that is humanly natural can be fully understood except in the light of divinising grace. A naturalising of the supernatural and a supernaturalising of the natural would seem to be equally involved here, although the latter predominates, if we understand the natural in a historical and typological (so stuttering, intermittent and hesitant) rather than static, *a priori* and transcendentalist fashion.⁵

‘Right integralism’ is typically dependent upon the assumption of pure nature, because it is in terms of the supposed prevailing rights of an extrinsically supervening supernatural grace that it wishes to insist equivalently upon the overruling rights of the Church as the bearer of grace, which lifts human beings to a higher and more ultimate end. Inevitably then, this position appears to involve a claim to theocratic rule, to the political authority of the Clergy over the secular realm and supremely the right of the Papacy to declare null and void laws that offend

⁴ See Thomas Aquinas, *ST I.II.* q.1.aa.1-8.

⁵ See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

either the natural law or the law of the gospel, and to depose secular rulers who habitually uphold such offences.

This position is dubious, primarily on account of its inappropriately secular understanding of ecclesial *potestas*. For if nature and grace are simply separate as different ontic areas within finitude, as opposed to being differentiated in an incommensurable fashion, not unlike that between beings and Being as such (since grace concerns our fuller participation in God who is, as for Aquinas, Being in its infinite repletion) then the command of grace over nature will be thought of in an equivalent literal and external or juridical manner: as a matter of mechanical forcing, however sublimated.

Therefore, as many writers have pointed out, the new integralists ignore the distinction between forceful *potestas* and influencing *auctoritas* which prevails only by virtue of its unilateral gift character of proffered advice and wisdom, just as grace is a free gift that must be freely accepted and can be freely refused, albeit at the cost of self-frustration. The distinction was made clear by the Jesuit critics of neo-scholastic pure nature, Henri de Lubac and Gaston Fessard. De Lubac showed how the papal *plenitudo potestas* only came to be thought of as a general power over the world in the course of the Thirteenth Century, and was only thought of in terms of mechanical power by Giles of Rome, under Averroist influence, and not by Thomas Aquinas.⁶

However, ‘right integralism’ does not just run the danger of theocracy by reducing authority to power. It also runs the danger of baptising a sheerly secular and immanent mode of

⁶ Henri de Lubac, ‘The Authority of the Church in Temporal Matters’ and “‘Political Augustinianism’” in *Theological Fragments*, trans. R.H. Balanski (San Francisco CL: Ignatius, 1989), 199-286; Gaston Fessard, *Autorité et Bien Commune: Aux Fondements de la Société* (Paris: Ad Solem, 2015). See also, Émilie Tardivel, *Tout Pouvoir Vient de Dieu: Un Paradoxe Chrétien* (Paris: Ad Solem, 2015).

politics, so long as it does not interfere with Christian power, given that, for this outlook (as not for Aquinas) natural law can be deduced and specified independently of the gospel.⁷

Several proponents of the new integralist outlook have, to be fair, rightly pointed out that Catholic integralism should not be confused with the ‘national integralism’ of *Action Française* and kindred Latin American movements. It is, indeed, possible to argue that in fact Charles Maurras was not a theological integralist, whereas his erstwhile ally but eventual ally Jacques Maritain actually *was* an integralist in the technical theological sense. The latter, being still too neoscholastic (albeit with some sophisticated and interesting qualifications) like his ally Charles Journet, never actually denied papal direct authority according to Giles of Rome, or indirect power to oppose secular usurpation of clerical authority, according to Robert Bellarmine.⁸ He simply did not think their exercise realistic in modern circumstances and appealed to an ‘integral humanism’, or to cultural Christian influence as the key to a ‘new Christendom’.⁹ Increasingly, his conception of the purely natural norms of the secular realm became a liberal democratic one, even if certain pluralistic and corporatist qualifications of this norms never quite deserted his political outlook.

It is in relation to this point that it should become clear that by ‘right integralism’ I do not necessarily mean something politically ‘right-wing’, even if it has often indeed involved that association. Instead, I mean exactly the combination of a certain sort of integral theocracy

⁷ See John Milbank, ‘A Revisionist Account of Natural Law and Natural Right’ in *Church Life Journal*, December 6, 2018.

⁸ Guillaume de Thieulloy, ‘A French Perspective on the Return of Integralism’ in *Church Life Journal*, July 21, 2021.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, trans Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame UP, 1973) [French original, 1936].

with an accompanying insistence upon pure nature. The latter space can be equally filled by the fascistic, the communistic and the liberal, as, ultimately, in the case of Maritain. There have indeed been Catholic Communist integralists also: for example, in France after World War Two.

The affinity both recognised and embraced by many Catholics between integralism and Maurrasianism is nevertheless significant. Maurras embraced a reactionary version of a specifically modern and scientific or positivist politics: this could quite readily be married with a rather positivistic and quasi-factual understanding of the arrival and operation of divine grace. Despite Maurras's embrace of political pluralism and corporatism, both positivisms encouraged a centralising drift towards a celebration of the irrationally positive authority of the nation state, wielding a scientific power within its circumscribed domain and upheld in the interests of its own power by the Church. For this reason, it remains not wrong to fear that 'right integralism' supports an inherently fascistic drift.

If an integralist politics is curiously allied to a dualistic view of nature and grace, then how stands it, politically, with the legacy of the *nouvelle théologie*, which rejected such a duality? In the case of the Dominican wing of this movement, with M.-D. Chenu and Yves Congar, one can detect an excessive tendency to supernaturalise the natural and to so insist upon the natural human drive to supernatural beatitude as after all to accept secular autonomy.¹⁰

In the case of the Jesuit wing, with De Lubac, Fessard and Jean Daniélou, more inclined to supernaturalise the natural, there was far more reluctance to embrace any mode of secular political engagement whatsoever. The practical upshot was an admirable insistence upon the

¹⁰ See Shortall, *Soldiers of God*; John Milbank, 'The Politics of the Supernatural' in *Tocqueville* 21, 19 January, 2022.

Church itself as the true society and polity, and a critical witness in turn against fascism, Vichy and communism, while never succumbing to a full embrace of liberal democracy either - save arguably in the case of Fessard, a close friend of Raymond Aron.

But the price paid for this extreme eschatological reserve could be a lack of attempt at partial incarnation of the ecclesial order in secular structures, as Sarah Shortall notes. One can contrast the Jesuit school of Lyon in this respect with the movement around Emmanuel Mounier's (Péguy and Bergson) inspired journal *Esprit*, with which they nonetheless interacted. Mounier and *Esprit* much more tried to articulate what a Christian social order might look like, but in doing so fell into successive dangers of over-alliance with fascism and Vichy before and during the early phase of the war, and after the war with communism, and with the bland optimism about ordinary human decency (diversely evidenced from George Orwell to Dietrich Bonhoeffer) that oddly (or not?) took hold of many people in the wake of the Nazis.¹¹

By 'left integralism' I mean not a leftwing version of the usual integralism, but instead an attempt to try to steer between these twin dangers of excessive eschatological reserve on the one hand and excessive incarnating on the other. This attempt assumes a denial of pure nature and so an integrated account of nature and grace. It is, in that sense, a much more theoretically consistent mode of integralism, and yet, just for that reason, I hope, promising rather than sinister. With both the Dominicans and the Jesuits of the *nouvelle théologie* and with *Esprit*, we have no good reason ever to despair of the world as world, since it could not exist if it were not everywhere touched in some often obscure way by grace: indeed, not even

¹¹ Emmanuel Mounier, *Feu la Chrétienté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 20113) [first published, 1950]. But of course the title involves a *double-entendre*, which complicates the element of Christendom-abandoning complacency.

the proponents of pure nature like Cardinal Cajetan have ever denied this.¹² Always and everywhere there are approaches to charity, and to worry about ‘anonymous Christianity’ in this respect is to try to be wiser than either Jesus or Augustine.¹³ Nothing in such an acknowledgement threatens the manifest truth that only the gospels reveal God in himself to be friendship and communion and so equivalently insist that the only way to unity with God and to human solidarity is through the eucharistic community of charity.

At the same time, this means that the Christian test for an acceptable political order remains its ultimate promotion of communion: justice is only justice if it is fulfilled as love; the Church being itself the polity of love, mercy and reconciliation beyond the reach of the coercive law. The documents of Vatican II never deny this and at times explicitly affirm it: in some not necessarily formalised sense, the legitimacy of any state depends upon its serving and promotion of the complete ecclesial human community as the foretaste of the kingdom. They also, if one attends to the small print, affirm religious liberty still in terms of the right freely to pursue the truth and understand the toleration of other religions in terms of their approximations to the grasp of this truth, rather than an outright liberty of conscience and opinion that might be invoked to legitimate a manifestly manipulative or terroristic religious cult.¹⁴

More recently, Jean-Luc Marion has insisted upon the separation of Church and State as a specific Christian legacy, in contrast to that of Islam.¹⁵ And yet he equally insists, after Gaston Fessard, upon the importance of the common good as a political lodestar which

¹² See Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 18.

¹³ In refutation of Crean and Fimister, *Integralism*, 269-71.

¹⁴ Jones, *The Two Cities*, 294-318.

¹⁵ Marion, *A Brief Apology*.

respectively combines first goods that can only be shared and renewed, like land, museums and sunlight, secondly the goods of various relational rights and duties for individuals, and thirdly and supremely, the good of mutual communion itself which results from free giving rather than economic transaction or legal compulsion. Marion even suggests that we need to rethink citizenship in terms of gift and charity, rather than of economic exchange and political contract.¹⁶ But to my mind that would count as what I am calling a kind of ‘left integralism’. A fully human polity would be guided by a sense of our personal givenness by the ‘other’ which is ultimately the gracious God, and our acknowledgment of that givenness by living out such unequivocal generosity. Nothing else would seem to be worthy of our human dignity and therefore a politics that denies charity and mercy is not a true *res publica* after all, no true exercise of justice, if justice, as Aristotle already taught, is to do with a magnanimous or generous distribution amongst friends: ‘the whole of justice is in relation to a friend, for what is just is just for certain persons, and persons who are partners, and a friend is a partner, either in one’s family or in one’s life’¹⁷

Similarly, the papal social teaching of Benedict and Francis has increasingly tended to construe solidarity in terms of fraternity and the exchange of gifts, rather than in terms of the natural law taken in supposed isolation from the gospel.¹⁸ And we can even argue that not just liberationist theology, but secular society itself sometimes seems now to think in terms of theological categories. Notions of ‘structural sin’ may at times divert us from personal responsibility, but equally they alert us to the ways in which ‘structures’ and ‘forces’ are only

¹⁶ *A Brief Apology*, 79.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, VII, x, 5.

¹⁸ For a cogent account of the strong continuity concerning the notions of solidarity and fraternity from John Paul II through to Benedict and Francis, see Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 254-67.

disguisedly impersonal, and to the way in which, as Catholic Social Teaching has always insisted, social groups take on an uncanny collective personality and not just in law. For this reason, we seem increasingly liable to talk in terms of the need for public processes of reconciliation and of the need for longterm historical repentance – for example with respect to the legacies of racism and slavery. All too often, as is evident, this can become an exercise in complacent and anachronistic self-righteousness, in which we do not enough allow for the conditions that made people blind to certain truths in the past, while suppressing the equal truth of our own possible myopia in the present. Yet at the same time, this new sensibility can amount to a sense of our long-term capture by innate cultural delusions of various kinds, in a manner that tends to decipher particular cultural strands of original sin. No doubt, all the same it urgently needs to be extended beyond the range of current selective fashions and obsessions.

There are therefore strong reasons to suggest the Catholic Church has never abandoned the view that a just politics necessarily orients itself in terms of the Church taken more authentically as authority and eucharistic communion, rather than as power and institution. Such a ‘left integralism’ has been perhaps most fully articulated by Andrew Willard Jones in his historical writings, which notably resist excessive historiographical tendencies to project back upon medieval integralism a modern sense of the inevitable conflicts between church and state and faith and science.¹⁹ Yet I believe that it is also implicit in the increasing

¹⁹ Jones, *The Two Cities* and the earlier *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St Louis IX* (Steubenville OH: Emmaus, 2017). The latter book is explicitly indebted to my own *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). Edmund Waldstein’s review of it, ‘An Integralist Manifesto’, appropriates its arguments for the cause of ‘right integralism’, without mentioning that they are predicated on an opposite denial of the reality of pure nature. For other exemplifications of ‘left integralism’, see Michael Hanby, ‘For and Against Integralism’ in *First Things*, March 2020, Michael Boland, ‘Christianity, The Crisis of Politics’ in *New Polity*, August 2021, 81-94. and D.C. Schindler, *The Politics of the Real*. Waldstein nonetheless says much with which I agree, for example in his ‘The City of God: An Introduction’, in *Sancrucensis*, August 28, 2017.

insistence of Papal Social Teaching upon the Augustinian order of charity as our true social guide.

Questions now arise, however, as to how far this emphasis is truly compatible with received liberal democracy. If we are to live, socially, as Christians, must there not be some incarnational anticipation of the eschaton? And in this respect, are exhortations to charity simply ethical injunctions to individuals to seek to modify existing social structures and practices? Is the meaning of Catholic 'social teaching', as indeed *social* rather than political, that it is indifferent to questions of political order that belong to an autonomous secular realm required to meet only certain minimal requisites for the conduct of civil society, guided by apolitical ethical norms? But then the question immediately arises as to how this could be consistent with an integrated view of nature and grace which the current Pope and his two predecessors inherited from the *nouvelle théologie*. If there is no pure nature, then how can politics be an entirely natural, autonomous realm?

In the remainder of this paper, I wish to explore these questions further. First, I shall argue that, for Catholic ethics, there is no ethics that is not already political, just as there is no ethics that is not already informed by the supernatural. Secondly, I shall suggest that these politico-ethical commitments in fact make a Catholic embrace of unqualified and existing liberal democracy impossible. Although this was said by Papal teaching openly before 1945, I shall suggest that since then Papal Teaching still says the same thing *sotto voce*, but that in current global circumstances it needs to be said more adamantly. Thirdly, I shall argue that the Catholic and Papal prioritising of *the social*, rather than the political and the economic, is not, after all, an abstaining from political theology, in the weak sense of a theology of the political

(as opposed to a Schmittian sacralisation of the all-powerful state), but precisely the embrace of a certain kind of approach to political order.²⁰

2. The Scope of Eudaemonism

To some degree, the implications of an integrated account of nature and grace were slow to be realised in the sphere of ethics after Vatican II. For a long time, an older view of the autonomy of natural law held sway, whether in conservative or liberal versions. The ethical was still understood primarily in terms of punctual and absolute rules and norms, and the will was regarded as indifferently poised between good and evil, with law appealing to conscience that decided its application to particular cases.²¹

Only with the influence of Alasdair Macintyre and Servais Pinckaers OP has there been a decisive shift from the modern deontological ethics of Scotus, Ockham and Kant back towards the authentic eudaemonism of Aquinas.²² Now it is realised that he inherited from antiquity the link between doing good and achieving flourishing and blessedness. The ethical is not just about self-contained moments, but about the whole of human becoming, the continuous formation of character, as, indeed, personalists like Max Scheler, Emmanuel Mounier or John Paul II had already taught.²³ The focus then shifted within the Catholic

²⁰ See Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 99-101.

²¹ Servais Pinckaers, O.P. *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans Michael Sherwin O.P. (South Bend IN: St Augustine's Press, 2001) [French original, 1991]; *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) [French original 1985]; 'Capreolus's Defence of Aquinas: A Medieval Debate about the Virtues and the Gifts' in Servais Pinckaers O.P., *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. J. Berkman and C.S. Titus (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2005), 304-20.

²² Pinckaers, *Morality; The Sources*; Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

²³ Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction, 2010); Emmanuel Mounier, *Traité du Caractère* (Paris: Seuil, 1947); Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979).

academic community, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, towards *virtue*, as opposed to duty, consequential outcome or even shared sympathy – to denote briefly the three main families of modern ethical theorising.

And yet...MacIntyre's sympathies have remained neo-scholastic. He continues to embrace pure nature. One can argue that this is fundamentally incompatible with his return to teleology; an incompatibility that now goes widely disregarded. For different natural things have ends just because they reach outside themselves in space and time and are guided by things beyond themselves. But if one invokes 'nature' as a supposedly closed totality, then there is no longer any beyond, and therefore no longer any goal for nature, as opposed to immanent self-regulation of a Stoic naturally legal variety. Thereby, we have 'unnaturally' betrayed the etymology of *natura*, which, like *physis*, always suggests birth, growth, transition and becoming. Unsurprisingly then, those theologians who already tended in the direction that would lead eventually to the embrace of pure nature, like Duns Scotus, also abandoned teleology in ethics.²⁴ For Scotus, the acquired natural virtues are in theory sufficient for human life without any infused addition, just because they are subordinate to a series of mutually confirming moral commands designed to generate a bare sufficiency of post-lapsarian order.²⁵ The drifts away from teleology in later scholasticism are even more marked.²⁶

²⁴ I realise that neoscholastics see this the other way round, under the general delusion that the Franciscan scholastic theologians were more Augustinian than the Dominicans (in fact the former tended to distort Augustine through an Avicennian reading), but see Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 85-6.

²⁵ Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* III, suppl. dist. 34; Bonnie Kent, 'Rethinking Moral Dispositions: Scotus on the Virtues' in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus* (Cambridge; CUP, 2003), 352-76.

²⁶ Pinckaers, *Morality*, 25-41; *The Sources*, 195-279.

It is therefore of a piece with his acceptance of pure nature that Macintyre is never fully clear whether teleology extends to the biological realm.²⁷ His teleological virtue is, in consequence, somewhat free-floating: contingently derivative from culturally contingent narrative tradition and examples of local artisanal craft. Its alienation from a nature whose teleology is not emphatically affirmed is further shown in Macintyre's excessive refusal of 'emotivism'.²⁸ Of course, he is right to reject A.J. Ayer's nihilistically Oxford upper class view that ethical proclivities are just subjective, but in ascribing this view to the differently posh Cambridge-Bloomsbury stance of G.E. Moore, he suppresses the point that Moore thought that emotions discern a kind of ineffable and undefinable Platonic good, even if he interpreted this in far too effete and privatised a manner.²⁹

Much more seriously, Macintyre overlooks the fact that Aristotle can be read as having his own version of the Platonic higher *eros* as recognising the Good: thus, for Aristotle ends of true human flourishing are discerned, *not* by the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, but by the natural and inborn (however culturally encouraged) ethical virtues themselves, which operate as an *itself* passionate and habitual mean between competing passions, especially in the case of the other three cardinal virtues of fortitude, temperance and justice. *Phronesis* merely considers reflectively the right means to deploy towards these ends.³⁰ In the case of Aquinas, the ethical inflection of the passions themselves, albeit more fully under the influence of

²⁷ The nearest he gets is in his *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago IL: Open Court, 1999).

²⁸ Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 6-34.

²⁹ G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.xii.6-xiii.8 and Book VII.

intelligence and will, is fully sustained.³¹ But with Macintyre, this role for natural emotion seems almost to vanish from sight.³² In consequence, the role of practical wisdom is overplayed and when cultural shifts in ethical sensibility are considered, they are explained in terms of the outworking of dialectical contradictions (in a still markedly Hegelian-Marxist manner) combined with altogether new cultural influences, rather than being analysed phenomenologically in terms of this transformation of sensibility itself.³³

And there is a still more glaring deficiency in Macintyre's approach to virtue and eudaemonism. As the late Emmanuel Perreau-Saussine and Pierre Manent have pointed out, he altogether *depoliticises* Aristotle's ethics.³⁴ Just as he obscures the rooting of individual virtue in natural birth, so he obscures the full extent of its inherent rooting in the *polis* alone (taken to be the polity self-governed by mutually participating citizens) which Aristotle regarded as the supremely natural and teleologically developed human institution. In consequence, he has nothing to say about Aristotle's praise of the politically mixed constitution as an inherent aspect of the very possibility for the training and exercise of virtue. Equally, he has no words of praise himself for Aristotle's magnanimous man, who can only be defined with reference to the political order, but was for Aristotle the very exemplar of virtuous achievement. For Macintyre, instead, the only really praiseworthy virtues are

³¹ *ST* I.II. qq 22-48; Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Passion and Virtues*, trans. Benedict M. Guevin OSB (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2017)

³² Again, it most appears to view in *Dependent Rational Animals*, 122. But even here, the stress is upon the 'training' of innate dispositions, with no real taking account of the Aristotelian truth that it is these dispositions themselves which alone discern ethical ends.

³³ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 327-81.

³⁴ Émile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair Macintyre: Une Biographie Intellectuelle* (Paris: PUF, 2005), Pierre Manent, *Préface* to the same, 1-6.

those of the artisan in communities of semi-anarchic isolation, or (in his celebration of Jane Austen) of Regency gentlefolk at a sufficient rural distance from aristocratic temptation.

Yet in reality, Aristotle's ethical treatises are just as much about politics as are his directly political ones. They ask what is the true work of man as such, and his answer is that this true work is the city.³⁵ The various virtues relate to roles to be performed in that city, which nonetheless exists in order to cultivate virtues in its citizens. These are first of all practical virtues, but ultimately contemplative ones - just as, for the ancient Greeks, the city as a whole offers sacrifices to the gods.

Indeed, because of this political context for virtue, it is not even clear that *virtue* is the uncontested centre of eudaemonistic ethics, and this is another questionable emphasis in Macintyre. Aristotle explicitly says that virtue is not enough to render a man happy or flourishing, since he must also do justice.³⁶ Justice in the most general sense (as opposed to the particular sense of fair distribution of resources) is at once the whole of virtue and yet more than virtue insofar as it is 'displayed towards others'. For this reason, we can consider justice to be a kind of pivot. Justice as a particular virtue is a disposition or habit in an individual, but unlike temperance or courage, he cannot exercise it on his own or in the wilderness. And if justice in a more universal sense coincides with virtue, as the whole matter of a right and reasonable ordering of human reality, then virtue *itself* cannot be exercised on its own, but requires also the 'moral luck' of benignly situated relatedness, that is outside its sole virtuous control.³⁷

³⁵ Aristotle *NE* Book I.

³⁶ Aristotle, *NE* V. i. 15 - ii.10; Robert L. Gallagher, 'Incommensurability in Aristotle's Theory of Reciprocal Justice' in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (4), 2012, 667-701.

³⁷ See John Milbank, 'Dignity rather than Right' in *Open Insight*, Vol VI. No 7, January 2014, 77-124;

Therefore justice, unlike virtue, is inherently a second-person, as much as a first-person predicament, and indeed in the city it is a third-person qualification also. Justice cannot just remain in you or be piled up as a hidden potential or asset. It must also appear and be done and be seen to be done, and therefore it is every bit as much a matter of honour, office and duty as it is a matter of virtue. The ‘dignified’ person is innately reserved in his virtue and yet he must also render dignified performances in the forum, just as the supreme giver of gifts, the magnanimous man, is at once ironically restrained and yet overwhelmingly bountiful. To such an extent is justice continuous relational enactment rather than reserved virtue, awaiting the last judgement, that Aristotle, as we have earlier seen, says that it is subordinate to friendship rather than the other way around. The city is public linkage more than it is private capacity.

There is nonetheless a kind of tension between virtue and duty or ‘office’ in Aristotle that somewhat anticipates the outright Stoic bifurcation between the private virtue of resignation and the public virtue of merely external duty and honest role-performing. The magnanimous man retreats from friendship to the degree that his pride is contaminated by the reciprocity of giving and so he bends away also from justice and towards the *otium* of self-sufficient theoretical contemplation. Moreover, his very excellence can demand his expulsion from the city, because if by rights the virtuous should rule, the rule of merely a few or of one can logically obliterate the democratic contribution of most citizens who are scarcely virtuous at all.³⁸ It is for this reason that Aristotle in the *Politics* was actually unable to reconcile the rule of virtue with the self-governance of citizens turn by turn, which defines the very nature of

³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, III.xi.12.

the *polis* as a republic.³⁹ There is a concealed tendency in his thought towards an apolitical virtue on the one hand and an amoral politics on the other.

To this degree then, a sheerly Aristotelean ethics can after all drift in an apolitical direction, especially as Aristotle had no account of natural law, as opposed to natural justice. It becomes then almost possible to view his political recommendations as a matter of entirely artificial *nomos* and as only natural in terms of convenience. This fits also with the way in which, for Aristotle, the ethical is a kind of natural balancing, at the prompting of innate dispositions, towards the mediation of opposing passions, and the intellectual factor in ethics, *phronesis*, has no onlook towards the end, in contrast to Socrates and Plato, for whom it participated in theoretical wisdom that enjoyed a vision of the forms, so ensuring that the virtues themselves were modes of intellectual discernment, which Aristotle explicitly denies.⁴⁰

It is for these sorts of reasons that Anglo-Saxon analytic thinkers, especially those close to Oxford *Literae Humaniores*, have tended to return to a deliberately ‘pagan’ Aristotle, such that virtue is nothing to do with divine incitement or transcendent lure, ignoring the more Platonic moments in Aristotle where he ascribes a ‘divine instinct’ to the man of magnanimity.⁴¹ This is true in different ways of Bernard Williams, Elizabeth Anscombe and Macintyre himself.⁴² Williams was happy to embrace an Aristotelian vitalism; Anscombe seemed teasingly to hover between that and a neoscholastic alternative of a presumably ‘real’

³⁹ *Politics*, Book III. And see Sebastian Milbank’s so far unpublished Cambridge doctoral thesis, *Sacral Citizenship: Philosophies of the City from Plato to Augustine*, 2021, available online.

⁴⁰ *NE*, VI.xiii.3-4.

⁴¹ *EE*. VII. viii. And see Aquinas, *ST*. II.II, q. 68 a.1 resp. and ad 1.

⁴² Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2011); Elizabeth Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ and ‘Authority in Morals’, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 26-50.

ethic based upon divine command, while Macintyre instead, splitting the difference, pursues the cultural alibis of ‘narrative’ and ‘tradition’.

But no Christian thinker, including Aquinas, ever thought about ethics in a purely Aristotelian way. They inherited also, via Cicero, Augustine and others, a Platonic current that more permits a seamless fusion of the ethical with the political and the theological. For Plato, intellectual wisdom cannot be reduced to a higher pragmatic sophistry of spiritual control (as it threatens to in Aristotle), because it is itself guided by the contemplative wisdom of the forms: this is one of the prime issues at stake in the *Republic*. Equivalently, its authoritative influence over the lower passions is not just a matter of power, but of a continuum of desire, rising to the higher *eros*. Because mind can be transformed into the divine, so the body and the passions can be transfigured by mind. It is for this reason that Plato could more readily include gods, women, slaves, children and animals within the scope of civic concern, and even within citizenship in the case of women, than could Aristotle. Virtue for him had a more seamlessly erotic and yet intellectually discerning character, and thus a wise and virtuous governance can be exercised over all and participated in by all, through the inculcation of a liturgical harmony, as articulated in the *Laws*.⁴³ By the same token, there was less distinction made between the household, economic space and the public, political space in Plato compared with the Stagirite.

All these tendencies are *a fortiori* true of Christian thinkers. For Augustine, all virtue is a mode of charity and it is the exercise of charity, forbearance and mercy by Christians, in their worship of the God of love, that qualifies them to be the best citizens also of the transient and

⁴³ See again, Sebastian Milbank, *Sacral Citizenship*.

coercive city of this world, enabling the fulfilment of justice as peace.⁴⁴ These virtues can be exercised also by women, slaves and children within the church, that is as much household as polity. In this way, there is no longer any tension between virtue and justice, since charity, unlike prudence, is as much second as first person, as much duty and honouring as it is reserved virtue. It is not even possible to contemplate the Trinitarian God who is community by removing oneself from charitable communion on earth.

It follows that, in a rigorous sense, Christian ethics is still *more* inherently political than that of Aristotle. Certainly, this is in relation to the true polity which is the Church, but neither the Fathers nor the Scholastics thought that the Church can exist without the secular arm, whose role remains strictly equivalent to the remaining place for the non-ritual aspect of the law of the Old Testament. Anything else would have amounted to a political Marcionism. And in this respect it is significant that Aquinas did *not* as yet describe the Church as *societas perfecta*, in self-sufficient exteriority to the other perfect society which is the political community. Surely this later conceptual shift assumes the doctrine of pure nature? Aquinas's integralism was in a sense much more drastic: he really made *no* distinction between the Church in its pilgrimage on earth and its cultural presence as Christendom. This is in part why he articulated no ecclesiology: everything he wrote was about the organisation and belief of a single integrated Christian society.

It is therefore the perspective of our grace-given participation in the life of the Trinity and in the Body of Christ as alone constituting the ethical which ensures the most drastic coincidence of the ethical with the political. The two integrations – of the ethical with the political, and of the natural with the supernatural, can thereby be seen as inevitably allied.

⁴⁴ *Sacral Citizenship*; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382-442; Tardivel, *Tout Pouvoir vient de Dieu*, 25-61.

In consequence of this perception, we can appreciate the way in which Aquinas's eudaemonism is even less satisfactorily described as simply 'an ethics of virtue' than that of Aristotle. Here Servais Pinckaers is a more prescient guide than MacIntyre, together with the highly insightful contribution of Andrew Pinsent.⁴⁵

Aquinas, following Augustine and Peter Lombard, defined virtue as such as being a 'good quality of the mind... which God works in us, without us'.⁴⁶ Virtue is therefore in itself more primarily divine gift, and only infused virtue is fully virtue at all. Charity as the form of the virtues is conceived in terms of the gift-exchange of friendship, in continuity with Aristotle who had already subordinated justice to interpersonal mutuality.⁴⁷ For this reason, we are to love our friends more than enemies, since love is more primarily reciprocal than it is unilateral, and ourselves more than our neighbours (though of course our neighbours 'as ourselves'), since it is in our own immediate self-presence that we most enjoy a union with God who is the prime object of our relational love.⁴⁸

Just because charity is in this way more a graciously granted state of being in friendship with God and others than it is an innate disposition, it is also as much act and continuous duty as it is virtue. And as the strange duty to love, even though all love is spontaneous and therefore cannot, it would seem, be commanded to appear by deliberate will, it can inevitably only arrive by grace: this is why *no* real love is for Christian thought purely natural and this most basic, most human emotion of all, is always supernaturally infused. To be charitable is first to

⁴⁵ Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *ST I.II.* q.55.a.4.

⁴⁷ *ST II.II.* q.31 a.1; a.8.

⁴⁸ *ST II.II.* q. 26.a.3; q.27.a.7.

be unilaterally honoured by God, immediately resulting in our reciprocal offering of sacrifice and worship.⁴⁹ But since charity is also active, and necessarily conjoins the love of neighbour to the love of God, it must also be externally manifest in the mutual honouring that is friendship: thus internal ‘Aristotelian and Greek’ virtue is also and entirely external ‘Ciceronian and Roman’ *honestum*.

In the case of both the love of God and of inter-human love, Aquinas regards honouring by the other as a more fulfilled condition than mere virtuous achievement. This is because the category of ‘the honest’ mediates between the inward integrity of virtue and the mere gratuitous superficiality of honouring.⁵⁰ Ethical fulfilment does not consist merely in a smug knowing that we are good, whether or not this is recognised, but neither, of course, is it displaced by the rewards of worldly, undeserved honour. Instead, it consists in that social situation where manifest, ‘honest’ behaviour is constantly met with an appropriate and friendly recognition.

In this sense, for Aquinas, the completely ethical is never a private, but always a joint social and even political achievement, just because the ‘gift factor’ of gracious but deserved bestowal – respectively, by divine grace which produces synergically the reciprocity of our desert, and by human social grace, which duly acknowledges every appropriate, and in itself gracious, because charitable bestowal. Aquinas explicitly understands this complete ethical achievement as also a collectively aesthetic one: *honestum* is exactly identical with

⁴⁹ *ST* II.II. qq. 82-7.

⁵⁰ *ST* II.II. Q. 144 a. 4; q. 145 a 1 *resp.* and ad 2.

pulchrum.⁵¹ After Augustine, he links honour, glory and grace and beauty, and sees beatitude at which all virtue aims as more a condition of ultimate honour, and of ‘honest’ beauty, with respect of our being honoured by God, than of virtuous consummation, even though we are honoured with beatitude on account of our attained virtue and *honestas*. Honour lies both above virtue as unknown divine glory and beneath it as amoral valuation, but virtue as virtue is defined by its appropriate coincidence with honour in the ‘everyday’ world of our terrestrial lives.⁵²

The primacy of grace as gift therefore entails a certain shift to a further equalising of the politically social with the ethical, if we take ‘political’ in the deepest sense. Virtue remains crucial primarily in respect of the dignity of the personal: what we offer in fraternal exchange with each other is just our unique character – our self-containment and distinctness of style which is ‘personality’.⁵³ The social order is comprised of friendship, since it is not an impersonal structure to which free and individual characters are subordinate. And it is for this reason that, contra Macintyre, in the wake of Charles de Koninck, Aquinas does indeed ascribe dignity to the individual person as such, as well as to the ontological status that is human nature, even though he equally thinks of dignity (to which Macintyre confines it) as

⁵¹ *ST* II.II. q. 145.a. 2.

⁵² *ST* I.II. q. 2 a.2; II.II. Q. 145 a.1 ad 2;

⁵³ See Albert Béguin, *Léon Bloy: A Study in Impatience*, trans. Edith M. Riley (Providence RI: Cluny Media, 2018): he cites Bloy as saying that ‘*Personality, individuality is the peculiar vision which each one has of God*’. See also, 83-5, 157. One can contrast Bloy’s sense of unique and irreplaceable personal style as the mark of the divine image, with an accordingly infinite reach of influence, for good or ill, with Simone Weil’s insistence that truth is impersonal, combined with a curious denial that the personalists like Mounier and Maritain denoted by ‘personhood’ the whole person, soul and body. She averred that only mathematical mistakes, and not its eternal truths, were marked by human personality, to which one might reply that the ‘free mathematics’ of music, as in the case of Bach, can combine an objective rigour of intricate form with an unmistakable signature of individual idiom. See Simone Weil, ‘Human Personality’ in *Selected Essays, 1934-1943: Historical, Political and Moral Writings*, trans. Richard Rees (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 9-34.

something belonging to diverse and varying perfect virtuous performance.⁵⁴ Precisely *because* it is personal, dignity is at once statuesque reserve and balletic grace, one might say – where modernity tends to divide the two and efface real dignity by splitting it into innate ‘right’ on the one hand and superficial expression or demanded social role on the other.⁵⁵

The primacy of beatitude, honour and gift over virtue is reasserted by Aquinas in terms of the gifts of the spirit and their fruits or deeds, which in turn reshape and transform the natural, cardinal virtues, ensuring, beyond Aristotle, that we can live in fortitude entirely without fear, be temperate even as ascetics, be proudly magnanimous in humble acknowledgement of the divine source of our generosity, be just to the extent of unlimited forgiveness and be prudent even if we are immature or mentally impaired.⁵⁶ Again, beyond Aristotle and more like Plato, prudence is the very form of the natural virtues and thus our passionate ‘instinct’ for the good is more Platonically infused with our wisdom and intelligence.⁵⁷ In excess of the natural virtues, the ‘gifts’ of the spirit and the state of the various modes of blessedness announced in the Sermon on the Mount are more intense participations in divine reality and nearer to being a matter of pure intuition than of considered reflection.⁵⁸ (This is, again, somewhat unlike Macintyre).

⁵⁴ *ST* III. Q.2 a.2 ad 2: ‘Personality pertains of necessity to the dignity of a thing, and to its perfection insofar as it pertains to the dignity and perfection of a thing to exist by itself (which is understood by the word *person*)’. Contrast Charles de Koninck, ‘The Primacy of the Common Good Against the Personalists’ in *The Writings of Charles de Koninck, Volume Two*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame UP, 2009), 74-108; 89: ‘dignity cannot be a proper attribute of the person envisaged as such, but of the nature of persons’; Alasdair Macintyre, ‘Human Dignity: a Puzzling and Possibly Dangerous Idea’, lecture given at Notre Dame University, 12 November 2021, available on YouTube.

⁵⁵ See Milbank, ‘Dignity Rather than Right’.

⁵⁶ Pinsent, 64-83.

⁵⁷ *ST* II. II. q. 47 a. 6 *resp*: ‘in the practical reason, certain things pre-exist, as naturally known principles, and such are the ends of the moral virtues’.

⁵⁸ *ST* I. II. q. 68 a. 1, a. 8; Pinckaers, ‘Capreolus’s Defence of Aquinas’; *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 151-55; Pinsent, 84-99.

There is also, in Aquinas, a displacement of the Aristotelian primacy of habit. Grace is ‘supernatural infused habit’, but this amounts to a paradox. Although the preparation for grace is entirely by grace (but already involves our cooperation, as it continues to do),⁵⁹ a new habit can suddenly begin, which appears to be contradictory. And it can equally suddenly be lost, through an act of mortal sin that is so bad that its commitment inevitably contaminates even one’s most virtuous deeds, memories and expectations. In effect, Thomas’s account of virtue as grace combines the Aristotelian insistence on virtuous action as the fruit of long-established habit, with the Stoic and Ciceronian view that the good is not subject to increase or decrease, and that awakening at last to the good is like suddenly emerging from the depths of water to breathable air, for which there is no preparation by degree, but an absolute difference between survival and drowning.⁶⁰

One can sum all this up by saying that since, for Christianity, virtue as charity is also encounter, participation and union, it follows that the primacy of both virtue and the ethical are more emphatically displaced towards just friendship and the political. To see this as simply to do with ‘the second person perspective’, like Andrew Pinsent, is rather to downplay the participatory aspect, since the God whom we love in charity is not simply another person on the same ontic plane. This may be why Pinsent so strangely supports the revanchist and scholarly-unsupported embrace of pure nature, even though he rightly denies that natural virtue in Aquinas is real virtue at all. While he similarly refuses the legalistic perspective on ethics, there is a sense in which his notion of a too literal shared triangular perspective of ‘joint attention’ between us and God performs the same extrinsicist work in his conceptuality.

⁵⁹ This consistent synergism obviates all the unfortunate later Baroque debates on this matter.

⁶⁰ See Jean-Louis Chrétien, ‘Bonheur et Temporalité’, in *Reconnaissances Philosophiques* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 35-49.

Yet for him to admit that the purely natural in ethics is equivalent to an ‘autistic’ lack of awareness would appear to expose its lack of coherence on this particular point.⁶¹

Aquinas, as Pinckaers argues, sustains the treatment of grace within the context of our human ethical aspiration and understands our ethical performances to be in seamless continuity with the mystical reception of gifts and our spiritual beatitude. Later in theological history, all this was lost. Therefore, the abandonment of the integration of ethics with its social and sacramental mediation, in favour of the direct submission of the individual to sovereign law, and of the integration of our natural behaviour with our intimate relationship to God, is of one piece with the displacement of mystical communion from the heart of our understanding of the life of every Christian. If we lose both the affective dimension of eudaemonistic ethics, and the ultimate intimacy of practical wisdom with theoretical beatitude, as the focus on virtue as specific skill or capacity, taken in isolation, tends to do, then we lose also the integration of this ethics with the theological and the political.

3. Is Christianity Compatible with Liberal Democracy?

But the question remains: if Christian ethics as theological and mystical, is also, by that very token, also political, then what sort of politics is implied? A prevailing answer here is no particular sort of politics, which can tend to cohere with liberalism, if that is taken as a way of constructing a kind of anti-politics in the absence of real social consensus. Or else liberalism is more positively preferred, just because it is held to sustain the Christian

⁶¹ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, 44-50, 100-4.

desacralisation of political power, the absolute right of religious liberty and the total separation of Church and State which is supposed to sustain the integrity of both.

Let us consider in turn the notions that Christianity favours no particular sort of politics and the somewhat related idea that it specifically favours liberal democracy.

The problem with the first thesis is that it is true in one sense, but in a sense that is immediately misleading. The sense in which it is true is the sense in which Patristic and High mediaeval thought, besides all later Christian thought that is in keeping with those legacies, remained in continuity with ancient pagan political philosophy which did not, unlike modern political thinking tend to recommend monarchy or aristocracy or democracy as always and everywhere the best forms of government. Instead, it tended to recognise many valid forms of government and to recommend that these forms be suited to given historical and social circumstance.

Yet this relative indifference to form was itself the result of primary focus on a eudaemonistic politics, positively dedicated to promoting human flourishing, rather than on notions of formally derived validity of sovereignty and jurisdiction. The latter, modern focus, arises specifically after the project of a politics of virtue has been abandoned as impossible, or derided as domineering. Thus, for the Church to suggest a Christian indifference to political form may result from its continued favouring of a politics of virtue. But that successive modern popes continue to think that politics should promote human ethical flourishing seems scarcely open to doubt.

What is more, antique political thinkers tended also to suggest that, other things being equal, a mixed regime combining the influence of the One, the Few and the Many was the most desirably conducive to human flourishing. This was broadly because such a regime combined

unity of overall perspective, allowance for the taking of emergency measures *in extremis*, the strong influence of the wiser and more publicly involved by inheritance, wealth and experience, broad popular assent and the likelihood that a widely distributed opinion might contain much wisdom of its own. The Book of *Maccabees* records Biblical support for this conclusion in the case of the Roman version of mixed government and Aquinas interpreted the Ancient Hebrew polity itself as another such exemplification.⁶² For this perspective, rule is regarded as a divine benefit, a kind of offering to the ruled people, however enforced, and the political order is seen as held together by the various personal offerings in turn of *leitourgia*, the giving of benefits to the city or the fulfilling of offices that grant such benefit.⁶³ Augustine suggested that Christianity more perfectly fulfilled this vision, just because Christians proposed uniquely a philosophical consensus as to the truth which refused any concessions to daemonic compromise and fully coincided with their social order.⁶⁴ In this way, the Ciceronian, proto-liberal need for a grudging, utilitarian co-operation around mere property and security could be minimised by the Christian presence.

It is by no means impossible to interpret modern, liberal democratic polities as still being partial versions of such mixed government. They can be seen as open to a shared republican debate about, and vision of a shared virtue or common good. The role of democratic ‘representatives’ can be conceived in somewhat aristocratic terms as that of wise educators and more expert interpreters of the will of the people, with the presidential role equivalently understood in monarchic terms of sustaining temporal continuity, overriding sectional interests, including those of government as such and the *occasional* need for exceptional

⁶² *I Maccabees* 8:14-18; *ST I.II. q.105 a.1 resp*; Crean and Fimister, 146-77.

⁶³ See Milbank, ‘Dignity rather than Right’.

⁶⁴ See once more Sebastian Milbank, *Sacral Citizenship*.

overriding of the judiciary and legislature in the interests of the security and unity of the people. To a degree, the American constitution embodies this classical feature and its inherent relating of the separation of powers to the existence of different social 'estates', even if this is more a matter of a liberal balancing of forces than in the case of the parent British tradition.⁶⁵

By comparison, the French revolutionary settlement was, to begin with and in conception, more nakedly modern and liberal. Estates were to be abolished and a professionalised 'state' now stood over against the people viewed *en masse* as isolated individuals who are only able to be represented in aggregation in terms of their 'general will'. Such an order is no longer to do with gift, whether as the unilateral offer of rule, or the mutual interchange of benefits by persons as friends, or by judicial persons as established corporations of various kinds.

Instead, as Jean-Luc Marion suggests, it is an entirely *economic* order in the sense that individuals now only come together through the market to seek a contracted private benefit, and the state itself is regarded as a vast 'social contract' intended to sustain the legal framework which will allow this smoothly to happen.⁶⁶ Ironically, a total separation of the economic as private from the political as public arises just *because* the whole of politics has been economised, and is really now based upon a political economy, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau as much as for Adam Smith.

Significantly enough, the French revolutionaries attempted for a time to *outlaw* all parental gifts to children, in order not just to destroy primogeniture, but also to remove the inherent political power of the family which is based upon a natural generosity that exists outside the

⁶⁵ Crean and Fimister, 94.

⁶⁶ Marion, 70-3.

law but usually enjoys some standing within it.⁶⁷ The completion of the pure liberal polity must, as we see today, seek to remove also the family as the primary mediating institution standing between the lone self-inventing individual on the one hand and the state and market on the other. The same polity is inherently opposed to gift and to any contamination of the exchange by gift, *at once* because gift is too spontaneously hierarchical, tending to create chains of influential dependence that survive down generations, and yet *also* because gift-exchange is too freely associative, cooperative and democratic. For all its claimed love of an uprooted ‘fraternity’, the liberal republic is as against brother and sisterhood as it is equally against father and motherhood.⁶⁸ It is in relation to the gift that one can perhaps best see how the usual divisions of Left verses Right do not capture the modes of a Classical and Christian questioning of the modern political order.

In the light of these remarks, we also need to reconsider aspects of the Traditionalist, Counter-revolutionary reaction. Of course, this reaction often wrongly sacralised a quasi-feudal and absolutist past. Of course, it was often influenced by occasionalist and ontologist metaphysics which misunderstood the non-competitive synergy between divine and human action.⁶⁹ This is truer of de Bonald than of de Maistre, but the latter still indulged too many sanguinary historical fantasies that assumed a rather mechanically retributive God. Yet at the same time, de Maistre was in significant ways closer to authentic theological tradition in terms of his integrated vision of grace and nature, while his attempted Christological and typological readings of human history, as always stories of apocalypse and atonement, opened up perspectives that were to be later more subtly elaborated by Ballanche, Bloy,

⁶⁷ Richard Hyland, *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 1-8.

⁶⁸ Marion, 25-6,60.

⁶⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 54-60, 68-74.

Péguy and Claudel, with echoes through to the *nouvelle théologie*. It is unjust to claim, like Perreau-Saussine, that de Maistre offered an unnecessarily supernaturalising and miraculous account of the French revolutionary process, violating the level of natural causality.⁷⁰ Instead, he sought to trace, albeit in an often overly lurid and sensational fashion, the precise ways in which the violation of social norms and taboos necessarily had evil if unanticipated consequences, while equally showing how some good always results from this evil - as with the forced separation of a too comfortable clerical caste from their wealth and their encounter in exile with Anglicanism, which de Maistre believed was important for future ecumenical union.⁷¹

As this perhaps surprising fact implies, *Considerations on France* is by no means a mere paean to lost absolutism, to the disconcertion of anyone who actually reads the book. It is rather an argument that the *ancien régime* contained more elements of a mixed constitution and of Burkean intermediate balancing forces than had been often allowed by excessive Anglophiles, while equivalently England bore traces at depth of the tripartition of estates – spiritual, ruling and labouring -- that France more explicitly advertised.⁷² De Maistre's claim that the revolution is a supremely unnatural, 'black magical' event was not simply to do with its anti-Catholic character, but also with what he saw as its violation of natural political norms. For these norms, the political association, of whatever kind, spontaneously emerges from the linkage of various smaller associations: the family, the tribe, the local community, alliances of workers, trusteeships of land and military guardianship, besides spiritual

⁷⁰ Perreau-Saussine, 21-36, 148-9.

⁷¹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 9-31.

⁷² *Considerations on France*, 32-40, 62-76. J.C.D. Clark, who alerted me to this aspect of de Maistre, bears out his reading of England in his own *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

communities of knowledge and worship. Like English Tories or Whigs of a Burkean stripe, he saw political 'representation' as a gothic invention, involving the personal acknowledgment at the centre of subordinate collective entities or juridical personalities. If he insisted that representative status was conferred from above by kingly edict rather than being primarily demanded from below, this was not just historically accurate, but also an acknowledgement that the political community of communities is never simply 'later' than the smaller communities, but is rather a precondition of their self-understanding and secure survival.⁷³ In one sense, indeed, the social precedes the political, as revolutionary liberalism ignores. But in another, the social is always already political as constituted, beyond reason, by sacralised ritual which must relate to the social whole that is to do, as Augustine thought, with the object of a community's ultimate love. To accuse de Maistre, with Perreau-Saussine and other Catholic liberals, of illegitimately introducing the supernatural into natural human affairs is to ignore the way in which this is linked in his thinking, following the possible inspiration of Vico, to a proto-ethnographic recognition of the primacy of ritual and cultural rhythm in human social organisation and the way in which this sacral dimension is not normally suspended at the political level, but supremely exemplified there.⁷⁴ Just for this reason, the execution of a king, that had been first carried out by the English during their own earlier, and equally iconoclastic revolution, is bound to seem like a sacral anti-ritual, with a consequent further and uncontrolled unleashing of blood, whether one interprets this Christologically, or in a purely anthropological fashion.

It is, then, possible to overlook the fact that Maistre's Platonic and Masonic Illuminism, which knew nothing of pure nature, is not in this respect the forerunner of a later Right and

⁷³ *Considerations on France*, 32-40.

⁷⁴ *Considerations on France*, 49-53.

even Right-wing integralism that built instead upon a neo-Thomistic distinction between the planes of nature and that of grace.⁷⁵ A too easy liberal celebration of the latter, as by Perreau-Saussine, therefore ignores alternative and subtler intellectual continuities.

In this respect, what matters above all and after all links traditionalism with Maurras in a different respect, is Auguste Comte's repetition of the Catholic critique of the revolution in a newly atheist and naturalistic guise. In the same gesture that invents 'sociology', Comte also argued that the revolutionary ideology claims the impossible. In reality, there can be no objective 'state' that stands over-against a mass of atomised subjects. The truth of political process remains personal and participatory, in however perverted a guise (from a Catholic, not Comtean standpoint). De Maistre had argued that to the degree that the revolution really possessed a republican dimension of citizen rule, this could only amount to the self-government of the Isle de France, with the rest of France subject to the authoritarian rule of Parisians.⁷⁶ But at the level of the nation, Comte, after de Maistre, claimed, estates, corporations and sub-communities have not really been fully destroyed, any more than unilateral gifts or horizontal reciprocity, because it is impossible to abolish human society as such. This involves, in any complex nation, a plurality of associated communities and their unification around a spiritual idea which will necessarily have spiritual representatives. Comte argued that these should now be scientists, the priests of a new 'positive' religion.⁷⁷

Shorn of its anti-democratic and reactionary dimension, this notion of scientific rule and control was in fact embraced by many politicians in the French Third Republic.⁷⁸ In an

⁷⁵ I am grateful to Douglas Hedley for drawing my attention to the influence of Cudworth on De Maistre.

⁷⁶ *Consideration on France*, 35.

⁷⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 60-2; Perreau-Saussine, 84-8.

⁷⁸ Perreau-Saussine, 87-8.

important sense, then, they accepted the diagnosis of a lie which first de Maistre and then Comte detected at the heart of the revolutionary project. In reality, the neutral rule of the State as arbiter of law cannot of itself produce any political order: that requires in addition a ‘positive’ project of normalisation, surveillance and regulation. In theory, liberalism claims to reject the shaping of virtuous citizens as its goal: in practice it can only rule at all by adopting a different and essentially amoral norm of the self-disciplined citizen that it wishes to produce in its own interests which, as we have seen, are ultimately economic: the smooth functioning of the market as a machine for numerically abstracting from reality and piling up this sum as supposed ‘growth’, while reducing the surface of the earth to an evermore uniform and exploitable mass.

Today, as Alain Supiot argues, this ‘government by numbers’ reigns supreme.⁷⁹ Comte’s seemingly eccentric desires have been terribly fulfilled: far more so than those of Hegel or Marx. It turns out, indeed, that one cannot abolish ‘estates’: so, today, we live within a kind of terrible, hereditarily meritocratic parody of feudalo-absolutism.⁸⁰ A cadre of scientific experts are in charge, and their supposed lone wisdom of scientific naturalism legitimates the brutal rule of the owners of guns and finance, with an increasingly large new proletariat (including most erstwhile professional brain-workers) held in abject subjection in the digital age: exiled, as Giorgio Agamben says, to the ‘bare life’ of their medical bodies or etherealised as manipulable desiring wills in a virtual reality which also offers them the tranquillising drug of a constant stream of titillating spectacle

⁷⁹ Alain Supiot, ‘Foucault’s Mistake: Biopolitics, Scientism and the Rule of Law’ in *New Left Review*, 132, Nov/Dec, 2021, 125-39; *Governance by Numbers: the Making of a Legal Model of Allegiance*, trans. Saskia Brown (London: Hart, 2020).

⁸⁰ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy: 1870-2033* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961); Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good* (London: Penguin, 2021).

Yet one cannot opine, with Supiot, that law should return to its detached, umpiring and mediating role, instead of trying to mould social reality - as if there could ever be any such reality that did not already presuppose the imposition of a juridical normativity in some sense or other.⁸¹ For law always does that: either to shape virtue, or else its simulacrum, as today. It is, instead, the very emptiness and neutrality of liberal law that will always be filled and usurped by a positive content, even if this positivity is itself the imposition of nihilistic emptiness. There exists an ineluctable dialectic whereby the rule of the purely formal will be inverted into the rule of the most brutally direct content. For this reason, as Georges Bernanos, Mounier and Simone Weil and others claimed in the Nineteen-Thirties and Forties, liberalism is always incipient fascism.⁸²

For the above reasons, it does not seem to be exactly true that Catholic Christianity favours no particular mode of politics. To the contrary, it has always tended to favour mixed government, which advocates a social balance of the one, few and many, with a concomitant mixture of the executive, judicial and sovereign powers. This does not imply any 'reactionary' bias towards unwarranted hierarchy, but rather a recognition that any large and complex society, beyond the intimacy of small tribes self-governed by ritual (and even this instance may be questionable), always involves an interplay between respectively unifying, minority and majority forces, besides stronger, more gifted and inspired minorities (however dispersed and distributed) in relation to the majority. To deny the need for their blending under a shared vision of human flourishing is always then to propose the tyranny either of a dictator, an oligarchic class or of mass and inevitably controlled and manipulated opinion.

⁸¹ See Kyle McGee, *Bruno Latour: The Normativity of Networks* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁸² See Simone Weil, 'Human Personality'.

To this we can add the ‘sociological’ and sometimes ‘socialist’ recognitions that, by nature, sovereignty lies not just at the centre, but rather in several collaborating foci, who ceaselessly supplement each other’s contributions. Sovereign unity is in this way emergent from gift-exchanging diversity, and not extrinsically imposed. And the diverse associations are at least as much unities of work and vocation as they are unities of location. Working enterprises, because of what they produce, their use of technology and their own modes of social organisation, inevitably shape politics. Yet this is not a liberal and economic control of politics but rather the inverse: the natural invasion of the economic realm by an inherently generous social purpose. Just for this reason, its gift-contribution deserves, as much as locality, political and central representation. This is the logic assumed by guild socialism, cooperative socialism and corporatism alike. Such doctrines may of course take rightwing forms, but sociology also generated, with Durkheim and Mauss, leftwing versions of the corporatist vision.

As in the case of the replacement of the priesthood and an ethical clerisy by a scientific and medical cadre, so also with the case of economic corporations: where they are not recognised as a natural component of governance, we get instead a bastardised and sinister version. Thus today liberal democratic states are not really umpires of a free and competitive market: instead, they are in strict alliance with, and often controlled by ‘scientifically’ legitimated corporations of a grossly hierarchical kind which wield power for the sake of it and for the sake of sheer futuristic experimentation upon a reality whose inherent order has to be increasingly dismantled, whether we are talking about natural biological species, human genders and normative sexuality, human families or the human inhabiting of normal physical reality.

For these reasons, we can also rebut the idea that Catholic Christianity especially favours the existing mode of liberal democracy. It may indeed not deny it, since it happily endorses majority consent, freedom of conscience and the liberty of personal choice. Yet the entirety of Catholic social teaching implies, just *because* of its promotion of ‘the social’, that liberal democracy can never be enough to establish political legitimacy. To say, with Perreau-Saussine or with Pierre Manent in his more liberal aspect, (which is somewhat resigned, in a Straussian mode, rather than enthusiastic), that the pragmatic organisation of matters merely to do with personal prosperity, security and national identity can safely fall to an autonomous state is surely unacceptable. For it is manifest from the indications I have given, that left to themselves, these things always tend to the monstrous. Thus, when Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière opposed the Catholics who supported Maurras they did not promote liberal political autonomy, but rather opposed an embrace of a positivistic autonomy of the State in the name of an insistence, against the neo-scholastic implications of pure nature, that the State must be judged by its promotion of justice as charity.⁸³ This norm has to apply from a Christian perspective, even though it requires, in a thoroughly Augustinian way, politics to limit itself, and even to exist in order to limit itself, in favour of the reality of spiritual communion, which is to say of the Church, understood eucharistically, not (in the first place) juridically, and therefore not in any way to which one can easily set ontic boundaries.

Part of the liberal Catholic case is the Tocquevillian double thesis that the French Revolution opposed not primarily the Church, but the aristocracy, and that free religion flourishes more under democracy, whereby it is also able to fulfil more effectively the old ‘aristocratic’ role of

⁸³ Michael Sutton, *Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism: The Politics of Charles Maurras and French Catholics, 1890-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 123-201.

limiting the modern power of the political centre, which Tocqueville rightly saw as fearfully sustained and augmented from the *ancien regime* through to post-revolutionary regimes.⁸⁴

Yet all of this now appears questionable. Burke, William Cobbett and De Maistre, still more than de Tocqueville, are supported by more recent historical research: the revolution turned away from a constitutional path towards a republican statist solution precisely at the point where it assaulted the noble estate in its spiritual arm, insisting on the democratisation of the Church as well as the State, and appropriated the Church's landed and educational patrimony in order to underwrite the new paper *assignats* issued to sustain the gigantic state debt which was another highly modern statist feature that it had inherited from the old monarchy. It did this in part to *secure* the propertied stability of the lay aristocracy who would constitute an integral part of a transition to a more constitutional monarchy.⁸⁵ Yet the fate of the lords temporal proved inextricable from that of the lords spiritual: it was indeed demotion of the integral role of the spiritual power which then endorsed the more extreme substitution of the state (consummating the process which kings themselves had been promoting ever since Philip the Fair) for the organic and participatory constitution of political rule by the estates.

The ecclesiastical Gallicanism that survived this shift can *only* be understood in terms of the separation of Church and State, along with the aim to subordinate the French church to French national interests – something that remained the initial aim, however later abandoned, of the 1905 law of *laïcité* (more properly, of 'separation') which was admittedly in part provoked by the theocratic pretensions of the clergy, as more discerning Catholics realised.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Perreau-Saussine, 7-36.

⁸⁵ William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 45-7.

⁸⁶ See Sutton, *Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism*, 162-201.

Perreau-Saussine oddly played down the extent to which, by contrast, pre-revolutionary Gallicanism involved also a lay interest in Church governance and a clerical influence on political affairs: it was more akin to Anglicanism than he wanted to allow, and its distinction of spheres was never an outright separation.⁸⁷

Much more plausibly, he linked Catholic liberalism to the rise of ultramontanism which, in effect, from de Maistre onwards, posited a rival international spiritual absolutism to offset the political absolutism of modern nation states.⁸⁸ The liberal and Actonian ideal of a ‘free church in a free state’ all too readily disguises the twinned dark secrets of these freedoms. If ultramontanism has indeed served to uphold the liberties of individual Catholics, then it has also, as Perreau-Saussine and Manent both recognise, augmented Vatican authoritarianism and tended to uproot the Catholic religion from its local national cultures and local influences.

As a Pole, John-Paul II was well aware of this latter tendency, and the concern of Pope Francis to promote national and local synods can be interpreted as his own Latin American-rooted desire to correct this imbalance. For there is something at once French, English and American about liberal ultramontanism: a primary concern to defend Catholics in secular or Protestant terrains where they are threatened, rather than culturally affirmed and supported.

This can be linked to a general danger of overrating the degree to which we should think of revolutionary polities as normative for modernity. Outside France and the United States, democracy has more evidently taken the form of an evolution of the mixed constitution, often on the British model. And the same penchant for modern republics can lead some Catholic

⁸⁷ Perreau Saussine, 74-80.

⁸⁸ Perreau-Saussine, 46, 58-69.

thinkers to play down the role of sacral, indeed Christological kingship in the past, along with the role of the Holy Roman Emperor, the historical strength and tolerance of the Germanic Empire, and the Catholic preference for empires as inherently federal, plural and complexly corporative, over-against the nation state, which is so obviously subject to a recursion of pagan idolatry. It is more than questionable for Perreau-Saussine to proclaim absolute sovereignty as the pre-condition for political autonomy and liberty, and for Marion to project backwards even as far the Bible a ‘separation’ of church and state that was only ever a relative distinction of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, in a pre-modern era when neither the state nor the church existed in our current institutional senses. King Saul in the Book of *Samuel* indeed does not replace the authority of the High Priest, but he *was* anointed and had been previously granted prophetic powers by God.

Perhaps these can be received as comments by an Anglican who senses that certain ‘Catholic’ features are more sustained within Protestant monarchies and *imperia* (which the United Kingdom remains, not being a nation-state but a now disputed alliance of four nations) than by Catholic countries that have been subject to republican revolutions and Napoleonic influence. In the case of Anglican Social theory, one often finds indeed an excessive celebration of the sacred nation, usually with attempted Hegelian or social democratic qualifications of liberalism, as notably celebrated today by the Labour Peer and political philosopher Raymond Plant.⁸⁹ But one also finds, either problematically blended with this (as with William Temple, and arguably, Rowan Williams) or in theoretical rivalry, attempts to celebrate the primacy of ‘the social’, as with the New Christendom advocacy of T.S. Eliot and the ‘Christian sociology’ V.C. Demant and Maurice Reckitt, that are extremely similar to

⁸⁹ Raymond Plant, *Politics, Theology and History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

the predominant emphases of Catholic social teaching.⁹⁰ But in a way, both Church establishment and the residually sustained elements of the tripartite order of estates, along with an allied bent to promote government-independent public corporations (like the BBC, the National Trust, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Colleges and Academies of the Arts, the unusually democratic and decentralised Choral Foundations) have presented in the past, if no longer today, more naturally fertile soil for these ideas to take root than in the case of secular republics.

Another way in which the American perspective can be misleading, is the Tocquevillian view that the more liberal democracy triumphs, then the more religion can flourish in a free, self-governing independency. This argument requires us to think of the American cultural situation as the modern norm to which Europe can eventually evolve. But it has long been apparent that it is more plausible to view things the other way around, and this appearance is now glaring. The more the United States matures, then the more its exceptional preservation of religion looks like the nostalgia of exiles and the quest for sort of museum-security in a foundationally anarchic polity, besides becoming later a badge of civic identity in contrast to atheistic communism. With the collapse of the latter and the increasing unification of the United States by a virtual, digital order, religious practice is suddenly plummeting in the direction of something more like European levels.⁹¹ Again, it is the French sociologists and not the French liberal political theorists who would appear to have it right: where religion

⁹⁰ Plant, *Politics, Theology and History*; John Hughes, 'After Temple? The Recent Renewal of Anglican Social Thought' and Anna Rowlands, 'Fraternal Traditions: Anglican Social Theology and Catholic Social Teaching in a British Context' in *Anglican Social Theology*, ed Malcolm Brown (London: Church House Publishing, 1914), 74-101, 133-74; Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014).

⁹¹ Jones, 338: 'It is an indication of just how quickly the twentieth-century American identity collapsed that by the second decade of the twenty-first century, those on the right were calling themselves nationalists, and those on the left were calling themselves socialists'.

receives no regular civic encouragement and is estranged from prevailing public ritual and civic norms, it will tend eventually to wither away.

4. The Primacy of the Social

My case then is that Christianity cannot naturally regard liberal democracy as a sufficient and religion-encouraging political order, since it is by definition a refusal of a politics of virtue, which Christianity necessarily demands. Its traditional commitment to mixed government and to a universal household citizenship, based upon the reinterpretation of virtue as charity, has been reinforced in modern times through a new grasp of the linkage of these commitments to the primacy of the social over the political and the economic, even though the social is understood as integrally including and linking together these two regimens - since it is in itself already both a legal and a provisional order. It is for this reason that there is a natural affinity of Catholic social teaching both with socialism and with sociology.

Certainly, CST refuses 'socialism' in the technical sense of outlawing capital investment as opposed to usurious interest, but then few secular socialists in reality espouse such a position. Indeed, few of them today, apart from Marxists, are so radically socialist as to accept, along with Catholic teaching, that usury inherently impoverishes workers and consumers by inflating the nominal currency and so devaluing their income.⁹² Or to note, with Catholic social thinkers that this results in excessive recourse to inefficient state bureaucracy, engendering in turn reactions in favour of the pure market and then, as we see today, to a

⁹² Crean and Fimister, 180-200.

quasi-fascistic authoritarian nationalism that confusingly blends elements of both inadequate solution.⁹³

Again, CST evidently refuses ‘sociology’, technically understood as an interpretation of reality in terms of a transcendently and ahistorically given social reality, reducing everything else to functionality in relation to this whole, as with Durkheim.⁹⁴ But if the ‘total social fact’ is reinterpreted, as by his nephew Marcel Mauss, as gift-exchange, then both the foundational primacy of the social or alternatively of the rational individual (as with Max Weber), and, concomitantly, of either spatial givenness or temporal genesis, are avoided. Human life is more plausibly envisaged as a continuing sustained interpersonal spiral in which neither the diachronic nor the synchronic have priority, just as there is no society not composed of individuals who have been born, and yet there exist no individuals not born into communities, and no families not part of wider tribes. Historicity is not suppressed, and yet historical culture is granted no Hegelian primacy over the equal naturalness of all human society, given our common animality and our common need to link head and heart with hands and feet through the symbolic, which alone ensures our peculiar dignity, as CST also recognises.

Thus for Mauss we can typically discern the later complexity of law and contract in primitive tribal covenant and gift-exchange, while inversely we can suggest that law and contract have over-forgotten this origin, rather as for Edmund Husserl, geometry has perilously forgotten its

⁹³ Crean and Fimister, 196; Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti: *On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020) *To Heal the World: Catechesis on the Pandemic* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

⁹⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 51-100. Nevertheless, the current essay is in certain indicated ways more positive about the sociological tradition than this book, without retracting its basic diagnoses - a development anticipated in the 2006 preface.

origin in acts of physical land-surveying.⁹⁵ Our search should then be for the *acme* of a ‘social’ balance between the primitive and the advanced, rather than any complacent Hegelian dialectical assumption that a more evolved liberalism will somehow bring back at a more advanced level, lost communitarian features.

This outlook, that has often prevailed within official Anglicanism (as with the theorising of Raymond Plant) is only in the end able to understand community in terms of a liberal version of Fessard’s middle category of the common good as mutual recognition of individual rights, with an allowance of positive freedom confined to equal social democratic provision of the means to realise those rights, rather than the achievement of a truly shared horizon of objective significance. But narrative particularity cannot be reconciled, as for Plant, with universal demands only by varying historical development, which remains always relative: instead, this reconciliation requires the continuous historical search for an exemplary and so relatively more timeless social equilibrium, in order to fulfil the demands of the natural law.

If any possible society is fundamentally a gift-exchange, or an exchange of benefits, as Seneca put it in ancient Rome, then it becomes possible to see how every society anticipates supernatural charity as the ultimate *vinculum substantiale* (to invoke Blondel after Leibniz), just to the degree that it understands its most crucial exchanges to be those of the symbolically sacred or ultimate - such that to exchange the sacred is also to receive and return things from divine powers or from God himself.⁹⁶ These alone ultimately command us to sustain reciprocity, such that what we most freely do, namely give, is also that which is paradoxically most of all our duty – in the same way that our humanity is only given by the

⁹⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Expanded Edition*, trans. Jane I Guyer (London: HAU, 2016); Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s, “Origin of Geometry”: An Introduction* (Nebraska UP, 1986).

⁹⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Miriam Griffin (Chicago IL: Chicago UP, 2014).

supplement of reason, which compensates for our peculiar animal deficiency by allowing social cooperation through language and technology, and by the supplement of freedom which allows us to seek beatitude with God and others.⁹⁷ The ‘social miracle’ of the division of labour and unplanned coordination would seem to be to do with the operation of an obscure social imperative diversely to fulfil the roles that require to be fulfilled. For surely the laws of supply and demand alone do not explain why anyone decides to become a dentist...

It is just because free generosity is also commanded, as the golden rule, and constitutes already in all cultural anticipation, the law of charity, that gift is not actually adverse to exchange, but is an altogether different mode of exchange compared to that of liberal economic contract. If the other, human or divine, compels me to give, then that is because I must already be in a relationship with him and therefore already involved in some sort of exchange, some sort of conversational give and take. I give freely and in the knowledge that my gift may not be acknowledged, received or returned, and yet indifference cannot be the mark of the purity of the gift, else it becomes impersonal and so without a giver at all, and not teleologically ordered towards the strengthening of relationship. If, as Jean-Luc Marion rightly says, a nihilistic zero degree of subjective valuation remains stuck with the horizon of value, and a pacifist zero degree of coercion remains stuck within the order of coercion, then it has to follow, as he does not allow (following Derrida), that a zero degree of exchange remains stuck within the horizon of exchange.⁹⁸ Just for this reason, the modern invention of a pure altruistic gift without exchange is merely the inverse face of liberal exchange with

⁹⁷ *ST I. II. Q. 5 a. 5 ad. 1.* Aquinas here explicitly recognises a parallel between the necessary extra or gift that is culture and the necessary extra or gift that is grace. Indeed, since the human spirit cannot be without either, the two things are in a sense identical: see Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 106-8.

⁹⁸ Marion, 57-82.

strangers that is altogether without gift.⁹⁹ It is this duality which Mauss deconstructed, thereby questioning also the liberal opposition of liberty with compulsion and of the private with the public.

Pope Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* would appear to agree with Mauss and not Marion, by embracing the gift economy of Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni.¹⁰⁰ If there can be no such economy, or no legal compulsion genuinely informed by generosity, then surely the economic and political spheres are left unredeemed, and by Marion's own criterion of the promotion of communion, are abandoned to the pale diabolism of decadence which he so rightly diagnoses? Interpreted this way, the 'separation' of the religious from the secular becomes also the separation of the politico-economic from the gratuitous. That this amounts to the impossibility of *any* degree of the incarnation of charity and anticipation of its ultimate apocalypse, is witnessed by the idea that ideal giving now becomes for Marion the impersonal and anonymous one of absent or dead donors of empty signs to distant and unknown recipients. How is this sort of entirely negative piety different from a nihilistic baptising of the impersonal and liberal economic which also accumulates and exchanges ideally empty signs with individuals who are but ciphers for persons?

If, as Marion implies, separation is a mode of phenomenological *epoché*, isolating twin essences, then is it not also in fact an emptily idolatrous refusal of metaphysical reality, which has to acknowledge the other through the risk of conjecture as well as experience, if it is to reach her in her reserved and not fully given reality at all? Insofar as the other is a person who gives herself as her mysterious personality which necessarily conceals the key to its

⁹⁹ Hyland, *Gifts*, 1-61, 594-5.

¹⁰⁰ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate: Charity in Truth* (Dublin: Veritas, 2009). On a gift-based 'civil economy', see John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Postliberalism and the Human Future*, 129-76.

unique style (unknown even to herself) then, each gift which I offer her (and every linguistic sentence is a gift) is an attempt to offer an appropriate gift insofar as she appears to me, but also a risk, insofar as I am speculating upon the inherent possibilities of the person that appears before me. For every risk imposes a new possibility upon the other – this is why it is infeasibly hierarchical, and liberals hate it in the name of pure free choice. If she accepts it, then this is tantamount to her embracing a new modulation, upon which she will improvise, of her own personal style. Thus, the gift as exchanged is ineluctably metaphysical, since it is both interpretation and waged conjecture, not at all the sheerly self-affirming and empty gesture of a purified will. For a gift that is inappropriate fails as a gift: locked away in a back draw in embarrassment, or dumped in a vase in an unseen corner, it loses its gift status altogether.

If gift-exchange as relational reciprocity is the very purpose of the gift, then it is distinguished from contract not by purity of motive, appearance or content, but rather by its analogical variation, asymmetry and non-identical repetition, which are also true to the mysteriously inexhaustible horizon of the symbolic. And by achieving the equivalence of the seemingly incommensurable, it also includes and consummates justice, both political and economic, as must be the case with the pure gift. *Contra* Pascal, as invoked by Marion and more in keeping with Augustine's original Trinitarian conception which he rather parodies, if power in no way anticipates knowledge and knowledge in no way anticipates charity, then they are confined to the cold circle without end of the sheerly natural, which fortunately does not exist and even could not exist, since all of being emanates from God and returns to him.

It follows that, to endorse a gift economy, is to begin to put more flesh upon the demand that fraternity be the test of political legitimacy and generosity the criterion of citizenship. These

demands cannot be left just hovering in the air, as if they could readily inform liberal democracy without any structural shifts, since the very structures of liberal democracy are, as we have seen, predicated on the impossible idea that virtue and gift can be considered politically and even socially redundant.

To put further flesh on this demand requires more honesty about the real implications of the CST principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. Subsidiarity radically implies distributism, co-operativism where possible and a measure of corporatism. For if power is to operate at the most appropriate level, then the worker must be allowed to retain as far as possible his own means of production and technology be turned towards enhancing the reach of individual creativity rather than the reverse, as at present. It must also require cooperative ownership where feasible and has to imply that sometimes political power should be exercised within the sphere of business, which accordingly must enjoy in fair reciprocation some mode of political representation in its corporate personality.

Solidarism was originally a corporatist philosophy, and it never really lost this trait in its much later Polish recension. It implies the generous cooperation and mingling of all spheres of society, with Josef Tischner adding the radically democratic and surely Ruskinian thought that work itself is a mode of spiritual conversation about reality and so is inherently a religious, never mind a political activity. In this way, as he taught, *all* solidarity, including the most apparently material dimension, is a matter of the ‘solidarity of consciences’.¹⁰¹

Besides the influence of Tischner, John Paul II was much influenced by the personalism of Max Scheler, who taught that the respective value spheres (corresponding to both Platonic

¹⁰¹ Josef Tischner, ‘The Ethics of Solidarity’, trans. Anna Fraś, online at <http://www.tischner.org.pl>; *The Spirit of Solidarity*, trans. Mark B. Zaleski (San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1984).

and Indo-European psychic, metaphysical and political tripartition, which we now know was never confined to the Indo-European cultural sphere)¹⁰² of material survival, vigorous life and spiritual development need to be represented in a social order of equivalent estates. Yet it is important to stress that this explicit ‘mediaevalism’ was articulated by Scheler in a specifically modern way, encouraging the development of expressive subjectivity and a Christian socialist blending of all these levels, such that material life also comes to share in ruling and contemplation, as with Tischner.¹⁰³ This vision seems more plausible than Charles Taylor’s claim that modernity has achieved a valuation of ‘ordinary life’ as such: no doubt the Middle Ages were too complacent about health and death, but liberalism economises human life only in order to control and appease it.¹⁰⁴ Ordinary life has today been robbed of its access to symbolic meaning, as Bernard Stiegler argued, just as Eamon Duffy, Ivan Illich and others have shown that lay participation in liturgy and festival was actually much reduced under both Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Thus, behind the seemingly merely ethical and social recommendations of contemporary CST, lurks even today a definite post-liberal politics. This surely needs now to be more explicitly reasserted. For the only way to defeat an increasingly terrifying scientific corporatism is to assert once more a spiritually corporatist vision, which would also amount to a ‘left integralism’ for reasons that we have seen.

¹⁰² See *Thomas Piketty, Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MS: Harvard UP, 2020), 51-64. Piketty contrasts the ‘ternary’ or ‘trifunctional’ societies of all previous human civilisations, with the peculiarity of the modern ‘society of ownership’ that is equivalent to Marion’s ‘economic’ society. The thesis of this essay is that CST implies a postmodern version of a ternary society. See John Milbank, In *Triplicate: Britain after Brexit; the World after Coronavirus; Retrospect and Prospect* in *Telos*, Number 191, Summer 2020, 91-114.

¹⁰³ Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 405-448.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, ‘A Catholic Modernity?’

The sheer pace of technological change and the resulting fluidity of skill and vocation can appear to render such an enterprise difficult if not impossible: but the monumentally increased risks today of technical means pre-determining spiritual ends, demands all the more that we should not surrender to the tyranny of a history driven by a seemingly random efficient causality. Instead, we should recognise that behind this tyranny lurks the real personal tyranny of the pursuers of domination, just as we should regard the market economy, as Marion suggests, as a superstructure rather than a substructure, if the basic structure of any society is really cultural and symbolic.¹⁰⁵ The dominance of abstract numbers and of mechanical causality is really a contrivance, designed to make it appear as if the fluidity of human role was just an inexorable fate. Arguably, it is only the fate of a civilisation which (as Leon Bloy suggested) inevitably remains within its founding story even when it turns against it, such that in refusing Christ we are performing the role of Judas, converting the real gift-money of his blood into the idolatrous money of Caesar and the market, which then purchases endless and increasing crucifixions of the poor, who most of all represent Christ and God in their nakedness of being and unarmed vulnerability.¹⁰⁶

Against this perversely contrived economic history of endless anarchic variation and mutation, we need to reassert, by deliberate historical action, the natural law primacy of the personal and the social, which to a degree pre-determines the acceptably spiritual roles that should be promoted, and is able to judge and sift, as they emerge, both the new spiritual possibilities and the new spiritual dangers which new technologies and economic devices

¹⁰⁵ Marion, 57-82.

¹⁰⁶ Leon Bloy, *Salvation Through the Jews*, trans Richard Robinson (Portland OR: Sunny Lou, 2021). See, also, Jacques-Bégnine Bossuet, *De l'éminente dignité des pauvres* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2015) and the afterword by Alain Supiot, 'Les renversements de l'ordre du monde', 41-64. Long before Liberation Theology, Bossuet (the theologian of Gallican absolutism!) proclaimed that salvation was as much about rescuing the innocent from the dire works of sinners, as sinners from their own iniquity.

may offer us: for example the entire realms of the re-production of images, sounds and their communication. Their selectively good use, one could venture, consists in their enhancement rather than overwhelming and distortion of the natural human inclinations to artistry, ritual and verbal communication that has defined the human animal since the primordial times of cave art. On this basis, the continued future discernment of acceptable vocations and provision for their training, just organisation and political representation should be considered to be not merely not impossible, but an increased exigency for the very survival of human civilisation.

What is more, the predominating notion that Catholic social thought has shifted towards an acceptance of modernity or even towards Catholic versions of existing modernity, would seem to be questionable. There was never any reason why Catholic theology should have supposed itself tied by tradition to either feudalism or absolutism: none of its commitments to mixed government, the naturalness of estates, a corporate order, a politics of virtue and pluralism of sovereignty, necessarily involve either of those things. So the non-nostalgia for those pasts is no sign of an alternative embrace of the modern. As to that, not even at Vatican II did the Catholic Church fully accept its decisive marks: the complete separation of Church from state, the privacy of religion or a right to religious liberty independent of the lure of truth. Indeed, papal encyclicals do not even clearly accept the notion of the 'state' over against other social formations, often preferring to speak of 'the political community'.

And to over-insist, like Marion, on 'the separation of Church and State' as a Christian achievement runs the perilous risk of regarding Islam as being as much alien to Christendom

as it is to modernity.¹⁰⁷ One can agree, to be sure, that the desacralisation of political power as such is a unique Christian achievement, and that if the West forgets this, then it is likely to lose its ground of defence either against theocracy or a sacralised positivism. But one equally needs to recall that, in Christian pre-modernity, secular law was subordinate to ecclesial law, and that by Marion's own criteria it is only an at least implicit acknowledgment of the gospel which paradoxically legitimises the free play of secular political invention.

What is more, to the degree that modern Catholics *have* (and after all, they mostly have) accepted modern political arrangements, it turns out that this has not necessarily or even most primarily been in their liberal democratic mode. This has been shown by the historical work of James Chappel. He demonstrates that the neo-medievalism of the Nineteen-Twenties (of which G.K. Chesterton was simply the English representative) often took radical as well as conservative forms, looking for the post-modern as much as reverting to the pre-modern, and that it tended to sustain a radical edge of criticism of the capitalist market, monopolised sovereignty and the erosion of intermediate associations.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, the first conversion of Catholics to the modern occurred in relation to totalitarian states of the Right. These were complexly seen at once as partially genuine realisations of a Catholic corporate state and as new conditions of secularised political emergency in which Catholics must defend themselves and retreat to the ground of individual rights and protection of the family as the last inviolable sphere of the spirit. These two seemingly opposite attitudes were often in

¹⁰⁷ Marion, 31-55. One can perhaps contrast his stance with Rowan Williams' insistence, as Archbishop of Canterbury, that Sharia law can find a place for operation within the United Kingdom. He later made it clear that this could not involve any outright contradiction of or inconsistency with the civil law to which all are subject.

¹⁰⁸ See, in particular, Paul Ludwig Landsberg's vivid little book, *Die Welt Des Mittelalters und Wir: Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über den Sinn eines Zeitalter* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1922). Landsberg, a philo-Catholic Protestant from Strasbourg, who eventually joined Mounier in *Esprit*, was more consistently anti-fascist than the latter, and was ultimately martyred by the Nazis, was more Augustinian than Thomist compared with Chesterton and insistent like Mounier on 'redoing the Renaissance', in order to join the dimension of subjectivity and historicity to that of recovering in a different way the lost mediaeval sense of organic 'order'.

practice mixed. Chappel shows how the first Catholic embrace of more possessive individualist versions of human rights was by Catholic Nazi thinkers, and also how Catholic natalism could disturbingly merge with a pagan, nationalist natalism.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, he shows how the beginnings of a Catholic embrace of *ordo* and neoliberalism, and its accompanying cult of liberal human rights, was not at variance with a semi-embrace of authoritarianism, but was rather a mutation of exactly that syndrome. If corporatism in its most extreme and statist mode is an alternative to parliamentary rule, then neoliberalism is an alternative anti-democratic project, but now explicitly tied to a liberal positivism which seeks a yet more purely economic rule, with politics and law confined to establishing and enforcing the machinery of the market. It was in this way easy to graduate from Carl Schmitt to Friedrich Hayek (as the Chilean Catholic Right did under Pinochet), the latter being not without admiration for the former.¹¹⁰

In this perspective, the gradual drift of Christian Democracy towards neoliberalism looks still more historically sinister, and indeed, as Chappell argues, despite its communitarian elements, too much in Christian Democracy from the outset sustained an excessively statist mode of corporatism and too great a confinement of welfare and spiritual nurture to the private family sphere.

All the same, Chappel's less novel claim for an official Catholic embrace of modernity ever having really occurred, would seem to be the more debatable one. Medievalism went into alarmed abeyance rather than abandonment during the Nineteen Thirties. Nor was there such

¹⁰⁹ Chappel, 59-107.

¹¹⁰ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: the End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge MS: Harvard UP, 2018), esp. 261-86; Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso, 2019), esp. 1-34, 75-115, 184-88, 198-201.

a clear division between anti-fascist ‘fraternal’ Catholics and anti-communist ‘paternal’ ones as he claims. Brothers always have fathers after all, just as gifts are both reciprocal and hierarchical. Both groups remained more bound by a shared Catholic ‘third way’ rather than these secular-defined divisions than he allows. Thus Dietrich von Hildebrand, ‘fraternal’ proponent of married sexual joy in Chappel’s classification may have opposed Hitler, but he also supported Dollfuss’ rightwing corporatist regime in Austria.¹¹¹ Conversely, the ‘fraternal’ Mounier and Maritain prevaricated over taking sides in the Spanish civil war, while the former flirted both with Mussolini and the Nazi left.¹¹² All the *Esprit* group supported their own version of corporatism and the difficult question of whether vocational groups and guilds should be compulsory (as much for the sake of sustaining standards or production and protection of workers as to maintain hierarchical order) or voluntary, had been debated by Catholics ever since the Eighteen-Nineties.¹¹³ It was often concluded that one needed a mixture of both, but a preference for one or the other does not neatly divide the paternal from the fraternal. Corporatist theorists like François Perroux, who supported Vichy, nonetheless never accepted the Nazi and fascist abandonment of subsidiarity and pluralist dispersal of sovereign rule.¹¹⁴

There has never, at depth, been any Catholic surrender to the nostrums and practices of liberal democracy and nor should there be. Any partial surrender has tended to be made for much the same dualistic and defensive reasons as there has been some surrender to totalitarianism. Today, once more, it is evident, as it was in the Nineteen-Thirties, that liberal

¹¹¹ Baring, *Converts to the Real*, 254.

¹¹² *Converts to the Real*, 266-74.

¹¹³ Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe*, 178-81.

¹¹⁴ See François Perroux, ed. François Denoël (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1990).

democracy is neither stable in itself, nor a defence against the totalitarian, being rather its technical laboratory. Catholic social thought has always implicitly known this by asserting precisely the primacy of the social. It is time to declare openly that this is also a political theology of the rightful prevailing of the personal, of gift-exchange and the one rightfully architectonic and shaping virtue, which is simultaneously parental and fraternal charity. A postmodern, Catholic, neo-corporatism that would displace the unnatural society of ownership with a new, more democratic version of a society of estates, in which human beings and human groups are understood primarily in terms of the dignity of their gifts in the sense of their unique talents (recalling the gospel) and political legitimacy is seen as a plural emergence into unity that arises from the exchange of those talents as gifts in sense of donations.