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Liberalism: A Religious-Dependent Faith

BARRY ALAN SHAIN*

Contemporary liberalism, both its American variant as well as its classical and European cousins,¹ is often thought of as a secular political philosophy with little in common with various religious faiths, least of all Christianity. Indeed, many of liberalism's most famous adherents, past and present, have taken a certain pride in distancing themselves from Christianity, most especially and perversely, Roman Catholicism.² Yet, such views may be mistaken in having ignored the fundamentally faith-based grounding of contemporary liberalism: first, its optimistic metaphysics makes it possible for its adherents to ignore human sin and to assume that individual self-love and corporate other-love form a natural identity; and second, liberalism's empirically empty defense of human equality elevates all human beings regardless of individual merit to equal dignity while rendering all other species subordinate, as means not ends.³ Without assuming a loving God, indeed in this case a Christian God who

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1. The meaning of liberalism in American English, and political life and discourse is some distance from classical liberalism and the meaning of the term in Britain and in most major Western-European countries and languages. In the United States, it describes a progressive political philosophy most readily associated with the left and state-centered economic and political policies, while in Britain, throughout Europe, and in its classical incarnation, it is most commonly associated with a moderate position on the political right and free-market economics.

2. This Author suggests that this hostility is perverse due to Roman Catholicism's long-standing close association with rationalism that is often viewed as an integral principle of liberalism. It seems that there is a common confusion in which Catholicism's theology, which incorporates powerful humanistic strains, is conflated with its centralizing and authoritarian ecclesiology. See Barry Alan Shain, *Man, God, and Society: An Interpretive History of Individualism at The John M. Olin Programme on Politics, Morality & Citizenship* (2000).

3. Surprisingly, moral theorists arguing in defense of animal rights have been among the most persistent and effective in pointing to the dependent, though suppressed, relationship of contemporary liberalism to Christian metaphysics. See, e.g., TOM REGAN, *ANIMAL RIGHTS AND HUMAN OBLIGATION* (Peter Singer ed., Prentice-Hall 1976).

maintains an orderly universe and loves equally that which he has created in His own image, as materialists have been pointing out for centuries,⁴ such notions should collapse as indefensible absurdities.⁵

Let me begin by considering the first of liberalism's unannounced positions of faith, its optimistic metaphysics that makes it possible for its adherents to ignore human sin, which effectively makes liberalism into something akin to a faith-based religion. But such a claim is not a new one, for as Carl Becker indicated in 1932, and more recently Norman Hampson and John Kekes have argued,⁶ modern liberalism rests on undemonstrable beliefs -- often quite implausible ones -- that its adherents do not recognize as faith-based. In effect, according to these historians of ideas, as the God of Jews and Christians was ushered out the front door of modern liberal political and moral thought, He was "snuck" in the back door in the guise of a benevolently ordered universe and a still to be observed natural goodness in man. More particularly, it is the denial by progressive liberals of the naturalness of human evil, known by Christians as original sin, which occupies a central place in the most prominent forms of contemporary liberalism.⁷

This is worrisome to philosophers like Kekes, not because he wishes to protect Christianity (in fact, he seems hostile to it), but because he fears that liberalism has created a wall of "illusion, behind which is hidden the true significance of undeserved suffering, wickedness, and contingency. The liberal faith substitutes secular illusions for religious ones."⁸ Adding insult to injury, Kekes continues by pointing out that,

[L]iberals who hold this faith are in a position that in some respects is strikingly similar to that of many Christians. As many Christians believe that evil is due to human beings and not to God, so many liberals believe that evil is due to institutions and not to human beings.⁹

4. See, e.g., FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, THE GAY SCIENCE Aphorism 125, at 181–82 (Walter Kaufmann trans., New York: Random House, 1974).

5. Glenn Tinder, *Can We Be Good Without God? On the political meaning of Christianity*, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, Dec. 1989, at 69–85.

6. CARL L. BECKER, HEAVENLY CITY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PHILOSOPHERS (Yale Univ. Press, 1932); NORMAN HAMPSON, THE ENLIGHTENMENT: AN EVALUATION OF ITS ASSUMPTIONS, ATTITUDES, AND VALUES (Penguin Books, 1968); JOHN KEKES, AGAINST LIBERALISM (Cornell Univ. Press, 1997).

7. This is not a position taken by classical liberals who recognize ubiquitous human sin but do not believe that it is a problem with which organized elements of the state need be concerned.

8. KEKES, *supra* note 6, at 152.

9. *Id.* at 39.

But, of course, liberalism's leap of faith is far more jarring because, unlike Christianity's, its principal adherents regularly claim to eschew matters of faith and, in addition and still more troubling, liberalism's claim of innate human goodness "is not merely unsupported by the available facts but inconsistent with them."¹⁰ That is, liberalism's defenders are either blindly naïve or dishonest in ignoring their faith-dependent belief in an optimistic metaphysics and in their arguing for a natural and salutary identity between human self and other love -- the two- millennial old problem with which all non-liberal Western political, moral, and religious thought has wrestled as various adherents have tried to move recalcitrant selfish human beings in a more expansive direction.

Looking back to liberalism's birth in the eighteenth century, its undefended faith-based confidence in a providential deity and his beneficence is most glaringly evident in that century's relaxed but radical new confidence in the ready overlap between selfish individual interests and those of the public. Among the best known examples of this is found in Adam Smith's defense of "the invisible hand" in which he claimed that selfish behavior led to the furtherance of the common and public good.¹¹ Thus, at about the same time that Newtonianism was establishing itself in physics and demonstrating that a loving providential God had set in motion a well-run universe, "a new attitude began to permeate much of Europe. This was the assumption that a principle of benevolence or *bienfaisance* animated man himself and the divine order around him. . . . The new outlook seems to have been more or less co-terminus with the frontiers of the Enlightenment," and the birth of classical liberal thought.¹²

Possibly, then, even more important than the critical role played by empirical science in the formation of mankind's new found confidence, was a metaphysical, if not religious and faith-like, assumption that held "that the earth was designed for man's terrestrial happiness" so that social, political, and religious thinkers need no longer encourage and defend social systems that urged men to be less self-loving and more

10. *Id.*

11. ADAM SMITH, AN INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE AND CAUSES OF THE WEALTH OF NATIONS 199 (J.R. McCulloch, Esq. ed., 4th ed. corr. & improved 1850), where he writes that the manufacturer "generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."

12. NORMAN HAMPSON, THE ENLIGHTENMENT 79-80 (Penguin Books 1968).

other-loving.¹³ Resting on a matter of faith, liberal thinkers seemingly were willing to transform in a fundamental manner political and religious thought.

Accordingly, this new liberal faith in a universe divinely "wired" to accommodate human sin and selfishness led to many older theological and philosophical notions being displaced. Most critically, those associated with the Christian notion of "the fall" and man's consequent deformity, the Christian dogma of "original sin," and that the world was a time of trial and tears rather than one made by God for man's pleasure, ease, and satisfaction came to be rejected as thinkers came to hold that the "earthly felicity of man was the constant and over-riding concern of God," with "a purposive harmony [having] underpinned the whole structure" of the universe.¹⁴ In truth, though, both postures, that of a fallen man and that of a benevolently created universe, are ones that can only be sustained by faith with the older one being an authentic expression of two-millennial old, though never uncontested, Christianity and the newer one resting on a divine faith-based foundation, even if not an orthodox Christian one.

Over the course of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, with little attention paid to such confident but unempirical metaphysical assumptions, the natural sciences became increasingly bold in progressively writing God out of its explanations of physical phenomenon. "In other words," natural science "seemed to have dispensed with the need for God as a necessary factor in its explanation of the universe."¹⁵ Yet concerning moral and political matters, no such revolution would or could, honestly, occur. God may no longer have been needed in the world of natural science and mechanistic causes and effects, but in the world of liberal morality and politics, His presence, explicitly recognized or not, was as needed as ever in organizing the social world effortlessly to accord with human needs and wants.

The liberal project as developed by most early Enlightened thinkers is, therefore, marked by an implicit confidence that the improving tools of science could, when conjoined to a world made by a loving God, be used to vastly improve human life. For example, Hampson reminds us that,

[B]oth Berkeley and Locke, as Christians, assumed that individual sense-impressions had an objective content that was guaranteed by God. . . . He and Locke, like Newton, based their systems on a Christian

13. *Id.* at 81.

14. *Id.* at 82–83.

15. *Id.* at 91.

foundation, the supreme 'pleasure' for Locke, being the eternal felicity that was the reward of the just.¹⁶

Here, liberal faith, acknowledged or not, in the world of science seems to have led to worldly successes.

Regarding social and political matters, however, early liberal thinkers' confidence that they had "solved" the enduring dilemma in human relations that resulted from human sinful deformity seems less assured. Liberal thinkers have proposed three solutions to this dilemma: (1) some, like Rousseau, argued that man had never fallen and, thus, was naturally simple and loving so that all that had to be done was for man to return to some form of his natural state; (2) others, like Smith, believed that humans were naturally selfish, but due to God's benevolence this wasn't really a problem and all that was needed was a properly designed society; and (3) still others, like past (and contemporary) feminists, Marxists, and radicals, believed that human beings are socially deformed but that the remedy is fairly straightforward and involves transforming a defective social institution -- the nuclear patriarchal family, capitalist markets, or Christian religiosity -- so that the artificially created tension could be overcome.

All, however, held in common that the problem could be solved in this life and without the supernatural intervention of Christ or the Holy Spirit and, in most instances, any strenuous effort by human beings to remake themselves. As Hampson notes, this new understanding, "was, if not explicitly anti-Christian, the antithesis of what had formerly been held to constitute Christianity."¹⁷ Explicitly Christian or opposed, all of the liberal alternatives rest on a non-demonstrable faith in a moral universe made for human well-being.

Recognition of the clearly unorthodox nature of these teachings from a Christian perspective, however, does nothing to reduce the faith-based assumptions upon which such claims rest. Indeed, as Hampson goes on to argue, "the coherence, as well as the confidence of the Enlightenment," in ways little understood by its adherents, "rested on religious foundations."¹⁸ Still more to the point, he finds that "the Deist was entitled to his belief, but not to the assumption that it rested on foundations more logically secure than those of the Christians. Natural

16. *Id.* at 98–99; see also JOHN LOCKE, A LETTER CONCERNING TOLERATION 38 (James H. Tully ed., 1983). Locke writes that "[f]aith only, and [wholly subjective] inward [S]incerity, are the things that procure acceptance with God." *Id.*

17. HAMPSON, *supra* note 12, at 101–02.

18. *Id.* at 106.

religion was as much a faith as any other.”¹⁹ Thus “nature,” for many a stand-in for God, was for them still a matter of faith. It did not, however, impose the same demands as did the God of Revelation on human behavior and man’s need for active divine intervention and sacrificial atonement to achieve salvation. As with the pagans, though with a newfound universal equality that only Christianity provides, modern liberalism was human centered. But unlike pagans and like Christians, it was newly dependent on religious-like faith.

Strangely, then, in spite of liberalism’s humanism and confidence in man and his reason, in an unexpected way, on philosophical grounds Christianity is preferable to liberalism: it is neither guilty of self-delusion in a hidden dependence on faith in its “belief” in a beneficially organized universe where self-love and other-love are fully compatible, nor does it preach a doctrine of human equality that depends on man’s existential equality (i.e. not God’s equal love or *agape*) that is incongruous with readily observable humanity. Liberalism, accordingly and unexpectedly, is likely the more faith dependent of the two bodies of belief, and by far the less credibly so.²⁰

This leads us to the second matter of faith that liberals rarely, if ever, acknowledge -- the still more essential liberal tenet that holds that all human beings, and only human beings, enjoy equal moral dignity and no matter how individually repugnant, are never to be treated as if they were something less than entities with divine-like qualities and created in the image of God. But, allow me to ask, upon what foundation can such clearly unempirical claims be defended? Aren’t they difficult, if not impossible, to defend without first having faith in some metaphysical foundation such as found in Christianity’s “Two-Tablet” moral teachings in which the required love of one’s neighbor logically and contingently follows from man’s requisite duty to love and glorify God?²¹ Indeed, once belief in the God of Christianity and associated corollary teachings are undermined, aren’t key notions of liberalism, such as equal human dignity, difficult, if not impossible, to sustain?²² And why is this? Isn’t it because such claims, unsupported by a Christian faith in God’s undeserved love of man, would otherwise have to rest on a belief that

19. *Id.* at 121.

20. Much of what Christianity argues, for example God’s love or Christ’s sacrificial atonement for man, is difficult to test or examine empirically. Liberalism’s claims, however, are in many cases, such as equality or wide-spread human beneficence, demonstrably false.

21. Hampson, *supra* note 12, at 104–05.

22. See Tinder, *supra* note 5. Much of what follows borrows liberally from him.

human equality and the uniqueness of human dignity can be shown to be, in some form or other, “empirically true?”

If this is largely true, don't liberal elites today confront a difficult to solve conundrum in that if equal human dignity can't be easily defended on empirical or non-Christian metaphysical grounds and if human beings are demonstrably deeply flawed in their selfish ways and, even then, unequally so, mustn't they turn to Scriptural support for the equality and dignity that only God, as recognized by Christianity, can offer each and every human being, and only human beings? But most contemporary liberals want no part of Christianity and, thus, they find themselves in a pickle in both trying to undermine Christianity and yet seemingly dependent on it. This situation is all the more difficult if, as many contemporary elites believe, the Christian God does not exist or is un-knowable. In short, if “God” has died for Western liberal elites, their troubling impasse is unlikely to be easily solved. Indeed, in a way too little recognized by the self-same elites, this is one of the central, if not the central, intellectual and political problem of the past 150 years as liberal thinkers and others have desperately searched for new foundations upon which to recast “divine” tablets with which to provide man with much needed authoritative moral guidance.

Modern liberal intellectuals, in short, confront a challenge that is of their own making as they search for some means with which to sustain the metaphysical vision of man as a morally unique being distinct from all other sentient beings and deserving special treatment without relying on the truth of the Biblical God or, more exactly, the God of Christianity: 1) to whom the undeserved love of man (*agape*) can be attributed, and 2) upon whom the gift of rationality and the dignity and confidence that this bestows can be secured.²³ Without such a foundation, it is hard to foresee how liberalism can continue to support its essential teachings of equal human moral dignity and uniqueness.²⁴

23. See JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER & JURGEN HABERMAS, *DIALECTICS OF SECULARIZATION: ON REASON AND RELIGION* (Florian Schuller ed., Brian McNeil trans., Ignatius Press 2006) (2005). Habermas remarkably concedes that the liberal understanding of equal human dignity “is based on the respect due to persons and ways of life that obviously derive their integrity and authenticity from religious convictions.” *Id.* at 42.

24. See LEIF WENAR & STEPHEN MACEDO, *The Diversity of Rights in Contemporary Ethical and Political Thought*, in *THE NATURE OF RIGHTS AT THE AMERICAN FOUNDING AND BEYOND* (Barry Alan Shain ed., Univ. of Va. Press 2007) (offering a non-foundational understanding that asks us to approve of contemporary circumstances without demanding a credible metaphysical foundation).

Of course, it is not that Christianity is incapable of sustaining such beliefs -- it can! The problem, again, is that most members of the modern and post-modern intelligentsia refuse or are unable to believe in the God of Christianity. Yet, nonetheless, they wish to preserve the mostly Christian-derived and faith-based patterns of ethical discourse that hold that man is a divinely imbued creature with God-given rights to equal moral dignity and that such rights are uniquely human. This entails, even if unrecognized, as has occurred in some Christian circles, too, the implicit and silently passive endorsement of "First-Tablet Christianity" in which God is to be glorified and loved, and the explicit and loudly active endorsement of "Second-Tablet Christianity" in which man is to be loved by his neighbor, though in this case without a prior and preeminent commitment to God's first commandment.²⁵

This is not to say, of course, that no other coherent moral perspectives are available that would free human beings from a dependence on God's equal love for their moral status. Yet most, if not all, of the alternatives would present liberals with serious challenges. More precisely, in most instances, such alternatives would be unacceptable because they would undermine one of the two fundamental tenets of human moral worth: (1) the claims of equal human dignity or (2) that those rights associated with legal and moral personhood are species-specific. For example, with full-blown ethical materialism of a kind most readily associated with De Sade, nothing is sanctified, while from the opposite perspective of pantheism much, if not everything, is sanctified, but often in ways that render being human of limited relevance. Thus, for Denis Diderot his moralistic materialism, somewhere in between the two, leads him to endorse eugenics and inter-species breeding between humans and other creatures.²⁶ Certain of these positions would be attractive to modern liberals because of their independence from Christian faith, yet for most, to the degree they're concerned with such matters, they are seriously flawed because they are either incapable of separating humans from, for example, other sentient beings such as other higher-order mammals, or are incapable of maintaining equal human dignity without discriminating along some measurable scale, for example between those of more or less intelligence.

25. See *Matthew*, 22: 38-40, where Christ commands, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." *Id.*

26. DENIS DIDEROT, RAMEAU'S NEPHEW AND D'ALEMBERT'S DREAM 232 (Leonard Tanock trans., Penguin Books 1966); see also HAMPSON, *supra* note 11, at 186 (writing of materialism by the mid-eighteenth century as already having "ended in an impasse").

Equality is, when once freed from its Christian foundation in God's equal love, in truth, not easily defended.

As Tinder notes, without God's equal love, "all logical grounds for attributing an ultimate and immeasurable dignity to every person, regardless of outward character, disappear." Moreover, "the notion that all people without exception -- the most base, the most destructive, the most repellant -- have equal claims on our respect becomes as absurd as would be the claim that all automobiles or all horses are of equal excellence. The standard of *agape* collapses."²⁷ Consider, then, some of the more extreme consequences that might follow from the collapse of such a standard. Some might, for example, reasonably demand that we embrace an equality between varying species based on some objectively measurable standard that might well lead to the using of deceased human beings for food stocks for livestock, or using criminals or the cognitively impaired for research rather than innocent and intelligent mammalian life. Surely, under most objective standards of justice, freed of God's unique love of man, sacrificing such human beings would be more just than sacrificing healthy dogs and apes for humans' betterment. Liberalism, thus, when stripped of its suppressed dependence on Christianity, is unable to offer adequate answers to a wide range of moral and political challenges. Most importantly, it cannot explain why human equality should be defended, nor can it provide adequate responses to those demanding rights for other cognitively developed species or to deep ecologists who view the earth and its plants and minerals as entities deserving to be treated "humanely." In sum, liberalism in its implicit dependence on religious-like teachings for its views of an ordered and just universe that has been created to serve man (though without the compelling Christian understanding of original sin) and in its Christian-derived defense of human and only human moral equality, and active denial of such dependence, invites confusion among its adherents or, more likely, a measure of dishonesty. Although this dependence has, above all else, not gone unnoticed among defenders of animal rights, contemporary Christians, either out of embarrassment from being associated with contemporary liberalism or from the opposite fear of being too closely associated with an assertive Christianity, have been relatively quiet in drawing attention to the common traits shared between the linked faiths of liberalism and Christianity.

27. Tinder, *supra* note 5, at 79–80.