



ROBERT GASCOIGNE

# The Church and Secularity

Two Stories of Liberal Society



# **The Church and Secularity**

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*Robert Gascoigne*

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*To my friends and colleagues in the  
Australian Catholic Theological Association*

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## Introduction

This book is concerned with the relationship of the Catholic Church to contemporary liberal societies. It seeks to explore the meaning of secularity as a shared space for all citizens and to ask how the Church can contribute to sensitivity to and respect for human dignity within liberal societies. In particular, it considers the ambivalence of human freedom in those societies and explores how the Church can assist in the expression of freedom as the wellspring of the common good rather than as a self-assertion that degrades communal and social relationships.

In a liberal society, all individuals are accorded certain rights, but the laws and institutions of society are agnostic about the transcendental foundations of those rights. They are simply an ethical given—the ethical premise of laws and political procedures, without any shared transcendental foundation of their own. There are good reasons for this, since liberal societies are secular and pluralist societies. To give such shared transcendental foundations a politically established status might privilege a particular religious tradition and threaten the religious freedom that is essential to a liberal society. It would also be harmful to the Church itself, since such privileges undermine the free appeal that evangelization makes to conscience.

Yet it is also true that this “givenness” is limited and fragile. The claim that every human being has worth and dignity is controversial in a host of ways: in its scope, in its limits, and in its application. In particular, the freedom that is at the core of human dignity is interpreted in crucially different ways, especially in terms of the tension between conceptions of individual autonomy and a willingness to support the common good. Its sheer “givenness”—its lack of transcendental

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content—can also affect the motivation of members of society to defend human dignity and their hope that this defense, this commitment, will not be in vain. The lack of a transcendental context can isolate the appeal to human dignity: it makes a transcendental claim without being able to link this claim to a comprehensive vision of reality. This can render it vulnerable to the force of more palpable and pragmatically demonstrable claims, which sacrifice human dignity in favor of economic, ethnic, class, power, and other imperatives.

The aim of this book is to consider how the Christian church can serve the cause of human dignity in this social and political context. While retaining its own prophetic freedom from state authority, how can it help to support the claims of human dignity: to respond to its force, to strengthen and broaden its content, to reinforce commitment, and to inspire hope that this commitment is not in vain?

The freedom that is fundamental to liberal societies can be the source and guarantee of the love, solidarity, and respect that make authentic community possible. Liberal society, refraining from imposed traditions of meaning and social hierarchies, has the potential to encourage the free development of communities based on mutual respect and affinity, without the intrusion of rank and the temptations of hypocrisy. Yet it is also true that the disengagement of individual freedom from socially reinforced traditions of meaning and the expectations of social custom can become the rejection of any meaning and value outside the ego, the mere assertion of the desire to dominate, control, and consume, the destruction of the ethical substance that enables individuals to develop and express themselves in a social milieu. In this sense, liberal society can and does tell two stories: a positive story of freedom of conscience and the development of unconstrained community, as well as a negative story of self-centeredness, vacuity, and the commodification of human values.

A key part of the Church's service to liberal societies is in the assistance it can give in strengthening the first, positive story of liberal society, in developing understandings of human freedom as the fundamental potential for community and creativity, rather than as destructive self-assertion. The Christian faith's own understanding of freedom, as the response to God's gift of life and love, can serve and

nourish all expressions of freedom in liberal society that are oriented to mutual respect and just relationships. Within the culture of liberal societies, the Christian faith's vision of the meaning and purpose of human existence can help limit the destructive potential of freedom, its rejection of anything but the self-aggrandizement and self-abasement of the ego.

Two texts are of particular importance for the argument of this book: Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*; and Augustine's *City of God*. It is guided by the vision of the Church and its role in the world that is articulated in *Gaudium et spes*, finding in this document an inspiring and illuminating perspective on the Church as a witness to Christ and servant of humanity. It interprets Augustine's *City of God* as a classic resource for the illumination of the ambivalent character of freedom and for living in the shared space of secularity, taking issue with those readings that interpret this text as essentially a rejection of the legitimacy of secularity in favor of ecclesial existence. It argues that the central concern of the *City of God* is not a contrast between Church and state, but rather a fundamental contrast between two meanings of freedom, based in two different loves: the love of God and neighbor, and the love of self. Because the *City of God* reflects on the meaning of freedom as expressed in these two radically different loves, it has much to say to our contemporary experience of the ambivalence of freedom in liberal societies. It will be evident that this book is not a work of Augustine scholarship: rather, it seeks to learn from a number of Augustine scholars in order to benefit from the insights of the *City of God*, most explicitly in the first and third chapters of the book.

It is important to note that this book does not set out to be a discussion of different philosophies of liberalism, but rather seeks to reflect on the essential features of liberal societies themselves, namely, the foundational importance of individual freedom and of human rights, whether articulated in normative statements of rights or protected by convention and common law. Clearly, these essential features of liberal societies have a number of historical sources, including philosophical sources, which, in turn, have complex and controversial relationships to Christian tradition and the churches. This book does not seek

substantially to engage in the important debates about this complex history. It focuses rather on the character of liberal societies, as a form of political life, with the perspective that societies based in personal freedom and human rights are a precious historical heritage. Encouraged by the endorsement of liberal societies in the documents of Vatican II, especially because of their transcendental roots in freedom of conscience, it seeks to explore the fundamental challenges they face and the ways in which the Church can serve humanity and bear witness to Jesus of Nazareth by helping to maintain and strengthen the ethical project of a society that respects human rights.

This book is written in the context of Catholic theology, and, especially in the final chapter, is particularly concerned with the relationship of the Catholic Church to liberal societies. The argument does, however, engage with, and has—I hope—greatly benefited from, many writers of other Christian traditions, and it is concerned with questions that affect the role and significance in the contemporary world of Christian faith as a whole.

The first chapter begins by considering the ambivalence of freedom in liberal society. It argues that a key characteristic of liberal society is the disestablishment of tradition as a constraint on individual action. This freedom from tradition-as-constraint can enable the deployment of tradition-as-resource: the free development of patterns of life and community through a social dialogue that benefits from the insights and practices embodied in traditions. Tradition-as-resource can be the source of an “ontology of the human” that is crucial to the ethical life of liberal societies. Yet the disestablishment of tradition-as-constraint can also lead to the rejection of all tradition as an imposition on individual freedom, so that freedom is understood as the denial of any ontology of the human and is exercised purely as unconstrained and self-assertive choice. The argument of this chapter then considers two key works that reflect on the origins of this situation in the demise of Christendom: Oliver O’Donovan’s *The Desire of the Nations* and Charles Taylor’s *A Catholic Modernity?*<sup>1</sup> While both of these authors emphasize the ambivalence of freedom in modern societies, they have very different appraisals of Christendom and the reasons for its demise. The chapter concludes by considering the light that the *City of*

*God* can shed on this ambivalence of freedom and on secularity as a shared social and political space. In particular, it seeks to interpret the “two cities,” inspired by two loves—the love of God and neighbor, and the love of self—as a means of understanding the “two stories” of liberal societies.

Chapter two argues that it is an essential aspect of the Church’s identity to commit itself to supporting human dignity and human rights in liberal, secular society. The tension between Christian identity and a commitment to universal ethical ideals is explored through a theological reflection on the relationship between Church and Kingdom and Christ and the Spirit in human history, against the backdrop of Joachim da Fiore’s theology of history, and in critical debate with the work of Andrew Shanks and William Cavanaugh. The chapter argues for a conception of the Church that retains both its identity as discipleship of Jesus Christ and its mission of solidarity with all human beings, based in a theology of the anonymous presence of Christ in every human person, as articulated in *Gaudium et spes*.

Chapter three argues that the two stories of freedom in liberal societies can be summed up in terms of the contrast between instrumental and noninstrumental relationships. It seeks to learn from the insights of the *City of God* to develop a theology of the virtues of noninstrumental relationships in a Christological perspective. It explores the ways in which the virtues of humility, reverence, and self-giving at the risk of self-loss are crucial to the expression of freedom in community, and argues that the Church’s proclamation of Christ as the definitive embodiment of these virtues is a fundamental service to liberal societies.

A liberal society is essentially an ethical project that must be strengthened and inspired by hope in order to flourish and survive. Chapter four reflects on the ways in which Christian hope can serve this project for the sake of human community. In dialogue with John Rawls’s essay “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” it considers the possibilities for the communication of Christian hope in the “public political forum” and the “background culture” of liberal societies. Christian hope has its most powerful source and focus in the Eucharist; yet for many in liberal societies, religious ritual is irrelevant to the

ethical project of respect for human dignity. The chapter concludes by arguing that the Christian Eucharist, the memory and celebration of Christ's paschal mystery, can communicate hope in the face of the temptation to despair at the gulf between universal ethical ideals and the frightening evidence of their failure.

The earlier chapters of this book are concerned with the ways in which the Christian Church can both bear witness to Christ and serve liberal societies. The fifth and final chapter is concerned with how, in the post-1960s age, this relationship to liberal societies is also critical to the Catholic Church's own processes of identity-formation. From the French Revolution to the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church was characterized by processes of demarcation and mobilization in response to the dominance of liberal anticlerical elites in many European countries and Protestant hegemony in the British Empire and the United States. Vatican II gave the sanction of the Church's highest authority to a new stance in relation to liberal societies, one expressed in particular in the documents *Dignitatis humanae* and *Gaudium et spes*. This stance—of witness to Christ in solidarity with universal humanity—has extraordinary evangelical and ethical promise. Yet it also makes great challenges, both in maintaining a communal and universalist perspective despite the individualist economic dynamics of liberal societies, and in avoiding forms of identity that give highest priority to demarcation from some secular interpretations of personal autonomy in sexual and life ethics. The book concludes with the argument that the Church's own social identity, rooted in Eucharist communities, should be bound up with the struggle for human rights and the resistance to commodification of the human in all its forms.

## Note

1. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).



## CHAPTER ONE

# Two Stories of Liberal Society

### **The Ambivalence of Freedom in Liberal Society**

A key characteristic of a liberal society is its ambivalence, its propensity to tell two stories. The first of these stories is of individual freedom as the source of creativity and diversity, as the warrant of critical reason to constantly reform social institutions for the sake of the common good; this story proclaims the right of even the most apparently insignificant to make their voices heard in the debates that concern their destiny. The other story is of freedom as a voluntarism that destroys the ethical and cultural substance of tradition, leaving only the emptiness of self-indulgent whim; it is a story of a society with astonishingly sophisticated means of communication but with little more than trivia and sensationalism to communicate. This ambivalence about freedom suggests a particular role for the Christian church in the context of liberal societies: to assist those societies in telling their positive story of freedom by illuminating the sources of freedom in human dignity and by acting in solidarity with all those who commit themselves to enhancing our consciousness of this dignity and to giving it practical effect.

By a liberal society, I mean a society in which the invocation of tradition is not sufficient to constrain or limit individual freedom. I understand the contrast between liberal and traditional societies to be the contrast between a society that gives priority to individual freedom and one that gives priority to certain forms of behavior that express a society's past and give it social unity. In a traditional society, these forms of behavior are not merely options or recommendations, but practices that are associated with strong expectations, constraints, and sanctions, such that if an individual were to ignore them they would experience, to varying degrees, social exclusion or anomie. A

liberal society is one in which, in principle, all limitations on individual behavior need to be justified by social argument, rather than by the invocation of tradition. A fundamental aspect of social tradition is religion, so a liberal society is a secular society insofar as it does not establish any religion or impose any religious test on public office. In this sense, the secular character of society consists above all in freedom of conscience in religious matters, in the elimination of any link between state power and religious affiliation.

A liberal society is one kind of modern society. A hallmark of modernity is the weakening or abolition of tradition as a constraint: A liberal society is that kind of modern society in which tradition can be freely adopted by individuals, in contrast to those societies in which the abolition of tradition has left a vacuum to be filled by various kinds of authoritarianism or totalitarianism, some of which may include elements of tradition—such as religion or the nation—taken out of their traditional context and transformed into instruments of total control. A liberal society is also by its nature a democratic society, although not all democratic societies have been liberal societies to the same degree, since in many of them social traditions have continued to exercise very strong constraints or modernizing political forms have abrogated traditional freedoms.<sup>1</sup> A liberal society is one in which individual freedom has priority over social unity, whether that unity be imposed by tradition or by modernizing institutions and ideologies.

In a liberal society, the dwindling force of tradition leaves the individual free to act in ways that were impossible in traditional societies. In the first place, individuals can form freely chosen communities, without the constraints of ethnic or class identity. They can choose life-goals that go beyond the boundaries of traditional expectations and norms. They can fashion diverse forms of life that express individual creativity and aspiration. They can choose from a range of possibilities that may have been denied them by a traditionally prescribed social order.

Yet, in order to fashion forms of life, to attempt human fulfillment, they will also be informed by the content of tradition—no longer as constraint and taboo, but as a historically formed portrait of human possibilities, a lived and tested set of practices that enable personal

development. In a liberal society, tradition becomes available as resource rather than as constraint, as a guide to the task of becoming an individual. Tradition as resource is a social argument, which, in a liberal society, is conducted in a pluralist context, making various traditions of human fulfillment available for admiration, scrutiny, and mutual critique marked by civil discourse.

The abolition of tradition as an assertive and stifling constraint, and the availability of tradition as a dialogic social resource, characterizes the best features of liberal society. In this sense a liberal society is characterized by both negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom, or freedom from constraint, allows individuals to make a range of choices concerning their self-fulfillment and life-goals. Positive freedom, or the freedom to fulfill certain purposes of human existence, is grounded in the willingness to accept certain constraints—such as various forms of moral discipline or commitments to communal and personal fidelity—in order to achieve these purposes. The awareness of these purposes of human existence, and their potential for human fulfillment, are embodied in tradition as a social resource. Tradition as social resource mediates a range of conceptions of human fulfillment, or the human good, that can be freely chosen by individuals.

These various traditions of the human good offer resources for an “ontology of the human,” a conception of human nature and potential that understands freedom as fulfilled in a variety of complementary relationships based in the virtues. Through the virtues of respect for others, fidelity in relationships, solidarity with those in need, and care for nonhuman nature, human beings are able to fulfill their personal moral potential. This ontology of the human is grounded in the human person him- or herself, in the human dignity of each human being, which makes a moral claim on all others.<sup>2</sup>

Because positive freedom always depends on tradition-as-resource, on a social argument, it is constantly contested. In particular, the meaningfulness of any ontology of the human, beyond the assertion of individual freedom itself, is the subject of constant debate, argument, and negotiation. Should equality in the exercise of freedom, essential to a liberal society, also extend to substantial forms of socio-economic equality? What kinds of legal respect should various kinds