

From Correlation to Assimilation: A New Model for the Church-Culture Dialogue

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ALL OF MY LIFE I've heard spirited advocacy for the dialogue between the Church and the wider culture, but this call has come, almost exclusively, from the Church and not from the culture. Putting the Church and the world in conversation has tended to mean that Catholicism must make itself intelligible to politicians, artists, scientists, and social theorists, precisely by utilizing the language and conceptual forms of secular politics, art, science, and social theory. Rarely, if ever, have I heard of avatars of the culture eager to submit their manner of thinking and behavior to the discipline of the Church, or to make themselves intelligible to religious people. It is this one-way quality of the conversation that is, I submit to you, problematic. John Milbank, one of the most incisive ecclesial commentators on the scene today, has said that the pathos of modern theology is its false humility, by which he means its Schleiermacherian tendency to seek the favor of its cultured despisers by aping their style of thought and expression.¹ As Karl Barth indicated nearly a hundred years ago, the sophisticated critics of Christianity have proven remarkably unresponsive to the overtures of Schleiermacher and his numerous disciples.² What I have called "beige Catholicism," a Catholicism that is too culturally accommodating, excessively apologetic, shifting and unsure in its identity, is the fruit of this false humility and this largely one-way conversation.³

¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 1.

² See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 23–24.

³ See Robert Barron, *Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative, Evangelical Catholic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 16–18.

What I should like to do in the course of this essay is, first, to explore more fully the theoretical roots of beige Catholicism in typically modern experiential-expressivist and correlational models of theology and, next, to propose, with the help of John Henry Newman, an assimilationist approach to the Church-culture dialogue. Then, in the light of this method, I should like to show how an assimilating Church might respond to three positive and three negative features of the American political culture.

Beige Catholicism

The Christian Church's willingness to engage the secular culture finds its origins in Paul's address to Greek intellectuals on the Areopagus in Athens sometime in the fifties of the first century and in Justin Martyr's decision, in the mid second century, to place Christian "philosophy" in conversation with the regnant Platonism of the time. At its best, Christianity has resisted the temptation to ask, with Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" or to speak, with Martin Luther, of "that whore reason." No Christian thinker better exemplified the practice of ecclesial-cultural conversation than Thomas Aquinas, who effected a still stunning adaptation of Aristotelian language to evangelical purposes. But during the modern period, Christian theologians began to engage the culture in a new and distinctive manner, allowing themselves to be positioned by the concerns and demands of the secular world. It is to this way of establishing the rapport between gospel and culture that I object.

What was its provenance? Given the enormously negative impact of the wars of religion which had devastated post-Reformation Europe, many modern thinkers began to speculate about a form of religiosity that was, in its universality, both rational and non-violent. It was, they concluded, the very particularity of positive religion and its authoritative interpretation that caused such trouble. Thus, for example, Catholics claimed that the Eucharist involves the real presence of the Lord, whereas most Protestants claimed that it is an evocative symbol—and since there was no way, finally, to adjudicate the dispute, violence was the only recourse. (It is fascinating, by the way, to read many of the Western reactions to the events of September 11th and to see these same modern concerns about revealed religion and violence coming to the fore.) And so we see in Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Kant, Jefferson, Hegel, and Emerson, to name just a few, the modern desire to set aside the peculiarities of positive religion and embrace a universal religion of reason. Thomas Jefferson, literally taking a straight razor to the pages of the New Testament, endeavoring to extricate from it all those passages that smack of the supernatural, is a particularly apt illustration of the process.

But the clearest exemplar of the modern religious style is, as we have suggested, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern liberal Protestantism. Religion, for Schleiermacher, is not ethics or metaphysics or aesthetics, or even revelation, but rather a mysticism grounded in what he calls “the feeling of absolute dependency.”⁴ This feeling, which is in principle open to all, provides the criterion by which the elements of positive religion—dogma, doctrine, liturgy, practice—can and should be judged. Along more or less Cartesian lines, Schleiermacher suggests that the objective and particular be brought before the bar of the subjective and universal for adjudication: experience measures doctrine, rather than the inverse. The radicality and thoroughness of Schleiermacher’s revolution can be seen in his marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity to an appendix of his *magnum opus* the *Glaubenslehre*. The dogma that generations of Christian theologians took to be central to the faith is not discussed in the body of Schleiermacher’s work, since its contents did not correspond, he thought, in any direct way to the feeling of absolute dependency. Schleiermacher’s fondest hope was that this experience-based and purified version of Christianity would prove attractive, both intellectually and morally, to the enlightened critics of classical religion.

The mainstream of modern theological liberalism has raced down the Schleiermacher *Autobahn*. Thus Rudolf Otto grounds authentic religion in our sense of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*; Paul Tillich roots it in “ultimate concern”; Karl Rahner sees it in the experience of standing in the presence of “absolute mystery”; and David Tracy anchors it in certain “limit experiences” that both challenge and provoke us.⁵ In all these cases, some sort of universal religious sensibility becomes the norm for reading and judging the tradition of revelation. In much of liberalism, this basic move is broadened out so as to include the two categories of “the world” or “the situation” on the one hand and “revelation” on the other. And thus the fundamental project becomes the effecting of a correlation (Tillich’s term) between the two realms.

Now problems with this method abound, but I will draw attention to what I consider its fundamental flaw: in the measure that theological liberalism allows revelation to be positioned by something outside of

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, in *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 99–100.

⁵ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 8–12; Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 44–50; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 160–61.

itself, it runs counter to the structuring logic of the New Testament.⁶ In the first chapter of Paul to the Colossians, we find this breathtakingly maximalist claim about Jesus Christ: “in him all things were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16–17). And in the prologue to the Johannine Gospel, we hear that the Logos made flesh in Jesus Christ is that through which all things are made, that apart from him, nothing comes to be. But these claims imply that Jesus Christ is the reasonability that positions, explains, and situates everything within finite creation. Nature, humanity, politics, art, science, culture, the planets and stars, things visible and invisible—all of it comes from him and centers around him. But this means, in turn, that Jesus cannot be positioned or explained from any point of vantage external to him. Both Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar complained that the principle problem with modern theology is that it permits Christ to be situated under the more general heading of “religion” or “religious experience,” whereas such a move is directly repugnant to the incarnational logic of Colossians and the prologue to John. For those who navigate the Schleiermacher *Autobahn*, experience becomes the measure of Christ, but the Jesus of Colossians and the Gospel of John must be the measure of experience—as he is of everything else.⁷ A similar difficulty emerges when we analyze the various correlational methods of contemporary theological liberalism. In Tillich’s version, for instance, culture, the situation, experience raise the questions to which the theologian attempts to coordinate the “answers” of the biblical tradition. But as any reader of the Platonic dialogues realizes, the one who poses the questions always determines the flow and nature of the conversation. More to it, the questioner provides the context in which the answer, *qua* answer, appears. Once again, this correlational style requires that a dimension of finite reality positions the Logos by which and for which the whole of finite reality is made. It is none other than this dominance of the environmental culture over revelation that produces beige Catholicism.

Now does this critique of modern correlationalism and experientialism in theology mean that the Christian Church is doomed to a sectarian retreat from the dialogue with the contemporary culture? The nearly universal tendency to answer that question affirmatively is testament to the pervasive influence of the liberal model. In point of fact, as we saw earlier, numerous Christian thinkers—Paul, Justin, Origen, Augustine,

⁶ Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 4–5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 108–9.

Anselm, and Aquinas, to name just a few—conversed very creatively with the wider society, but they did so in accord with the Christocentric logic of revelation and not in accord with liberal assumptions. I should like to explicate the nature of this approach more thoroughly by drawing attention to the thought of John Henry Newman, a theologian who was, simultaneously, deeply invested in the dialogue with the culture of his time and, in his own words, a life-long opponent of “the spirit of liberalism in religion.”⁸ In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman argued that one of the marks of a healthy and properly developing Church is “the power of assimilation,” that is to say, its ability to adapt to its environment, taking in what it can and resisting what it must.⁹ A robust organism draws into itself and adapts to its purposes certain features of its world, and it throws off other elements that would compromise or threaten its essential structure. Newman observes shrewdly that an unhealthy animal will, soon enough, be itself assimilated by the stronger animals around it.

In light of these observations, might I suggest a theological relationship to the culture that is assimilationist rather than correlationist? The Church ought to reach out to the world, but never allow the world (as the post-conciliar slogan had it) to set the agenda for the Church. The body of Christ ought to move confidently within the environment around it, adapting to itself whatever is good, true, and beautiful, and expelling whatever is alien to its form of life, using all the time its own organic structure as criterion and norm. Something I’d like especially to stress is this: a beige, culturally accommodating Catholicism is incapable of both proper resistance to and proper absorption of the wider world. The willingness of the Vatican II fathers to turn to modern society in a missionary spirit was born of their serene confidence in the essential doctrinal and moral integrity of the Church. In his recent remarks on the right interpretation of Vatican II, Benedict XVI observed that the purpose of the Council was not to make the Church more like the world but rather to make the world more like the Church. Accordingly, he interprets John XXIII’s famous trope of the opening of the windows as expressive of the Church’s desire to let the wisdom, truth, and spiritual vitality of the Church out, for the sake of transforming the society. Balthasar meant much the same when he spoke in the 1950s of “razing the bastions” of a Church still crouching too defensively behind its own

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Biglietto Speech*, as quoted in Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 720.

⁹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1968), 185–89.

walls. To be sure, the Vatican II fathers called for and implemented changes in the Church, but these changes had a missionary and evangelical purpose; they were meant to render the Church more capable of drawing the logoi of the world into the Logos of Jesus Christ, to assimilate rather than correlate. Sadly, after the Council, this turning toward the modern society was interpreted, in far too many quarters, as a turning into modern society, assimilation devolving into accommodation. What I have called beige Catholicism is the result of this hermeneutical mistake.

The Assimilating Church and the American Culture: The Negative Dimension

What I should like to do in this next section of this essay is to engage in a reading of our American culture from the standpoint of the assimilating Church, showing how the community gathered around Jesus Christ ought to relate to the positive and negative elements within that culture. I am consciously turning away from the dominant liberal model of analyzing “the situation” in order to put it into correlation with the “answers” coming from the tradition; instead, I will endeavor to show precisely why the Church must resist certain features of the culture and precisely how it can adapt others to itself.

Let us turn first to the relatively negative side of the ledger. There is, within the American political culture, a strong strain of Hobbesianism, mediated to it largely by John Locke by way of Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Hobbes’s political philosophy is intelligible only against the background of certain shifts in metaphysics and epistemology at the dawn of the modern period. Under the influence of the nominalism of William of Occam and the univocal conception of being formulated by Duns Scotus, early modern thinkers tended to see the universe as composed of isolated individuals, particles in motion.¹⁰ This conception had a clear social implication. Whereas for Thomas Aquinas, the human being is, by nature, a political animal, that is to say, connected to everyone else in the civil society by ontological and not merely conventional bonds, for Thomas Hobbes, the human is, by nature, non-political, self-interested, moved by basic passions for self-preservation. This is why Hobbes’s state of nature is the state of war, productive of a life that is “solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.” Political organization, on Hobbes’s reading, comes about through an artificially contrived social contract in which people reluctantly surrender some of their rights in order to maintain some modicum of peace. Because of this reductive understanding of govern-

¹⁰ Barron, *Bridging the Great Divide*, 62.

ment, the ethical and spiritual purpose of politics is set aside. The purpose of the state is the adjudication of disputes among the citizens and, ultimately, the protection of each against the violent attacks of others. In the classical context, the *raison d'être* of government was the encouragement of moral excellence, whereas in the Hobbesian framework, it is the maintenance of order.

In his political philosophy, John Locke softened and modified Hobbes's social contract theory, but kept its most fundamental features, including and especially the artificiality of the political arrangement and the severe truncation of the sense of the common good. Jefferson gives voice to the Hobbes-Locke perspective when he speaks in the Declaration of Independence of the right to pursue happiness as one sees fit. Most Western philosophers, from the classical period through the high middle ages, considered the determination of the objective nature of happiness the central philosophical question, and they furthermore held that the purpose of politics is to conduce, at least to some degree, to the attainment of happiness. In accord with his distinctively modern assumptions, Jefferson relativizes and subjectivizes the meaning of happiness and effectively dissociates it from the work of government.

Within the confines of this brief presentation, I can but gesture toward some of the negative consequences of this fundamentally Hobbesian conception of politics. First, we notice the individualism and litigiousness of our society. When the common good remains unexplored and unarticulated, and when the government's purpose is reduced to that of the adjudication of disputes, we do tend to lose our corporate social identity and a shared sense of moral direction. Further, when we no longer understand ourselves to be ontological siblings, connected to one another by the deepest metaphysical bonds, we do indeed devolve into a collectivity of individuals clamoring for rights and special prerogatives. The Hobbesianism of our society can be seen as well, as Robert Kraynak points out, in the flattening and coarsening of our popular culture.¹¹ When self-expression becomes the supreme value, aesthetic standards are either overlooked or aggressively marginalized. But the Hobbes influence shows itself perhaps most tragically in the government's unwillingness to intervene firmly when clear moral values are under attack in the society. Two decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court are especially illuminating in this regard. In *Roe v. Wade*, the court famously found a right to privacy buried in the provisions of the Constitution and on that basis allowed for practically unlimited access to abortion throughout the United States.

¹¹ Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 26–27.

But the court's resolution of the matter of *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* is even more sobering and disturbing. Expanding on the principle of privacy, the justices decided that it belongs to the very nature of individual liberty to determine the meaning of one's own life, indeed the meaning of existence and the universe!¹² It would be hard to imagine a more radical expression of Hobbesian relativism and individualism.

Another negative feature of the American culture—with certain roots in Hobbes—is our typically modern understanding of freedom as choice. The Dominican scholar Servais Pinckaers has drawn a simple but illuminating distinction between this conception of liberty and the idea of freedom that held sway in the classical and Christian periods. The former he calls “the freedom of indifference” and the latter “the freedom for excellence.”¹³ On the modern reading, freedom is the capacity to hover above the yes and the no and to make a determination in one direction or the other, without any coercion either interior or exterior. In this context, law, discipline, and virtue are in an extremely tensive relationship with freedom, since they represent limitation on the range of choice. Now freedom for excellence is not primarily independent choice but rather the disciplining of desire so as to make the achievement of the good first possible and then effortless. One becomes a free speaker of the English language, not so much by cultivating his power to choose, but rather by submitting himself to a whole series of rules, disciplines, and masters. When those directives are sufficiently internalized, that person becomes capable of expressing in English whatever he wants: he becomes free in his speech. Or one emerges as a free player of golf, not in the measure that she swings the club according to her personal whim, but inasmuch as she submits herself to a strict and densely objective nexus of rules, practices, directives, and restrictions. In this process, she becomes capable of responding well and creatively to the ever-shifting demands of the game of golf. Given this notion of freedom, liberty is by no means opposed to the law but rather finds itself in relation to the law. For the advocates of the freedom for excellence, self-expression is far less important than the ordering of the self in the direction of the good. John Paul II was one of the most eloquent defenders of freedom in the second half of the twentieth century, but throughout his pontificate, he insisted upon the correlation between liberty and truth.¹⁴ On a freedom of indifference reading, this juxtaposition is puzzling at best; but on a freedom for

¹² *Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania*, 112 Sup. Ct. 2791 at 2807.

¹³ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 375.

¹⁴ See especially the encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*.

excellence interpretation, it is coherent. There is probably no word that stirs the American heart more than “freedom,” no value that is more prized than liberty. But the mainstream of American culture interprets that term along modern lines, construing it as spontaneous personal choice and self-determination. This is, of course, repugnant to a biblical tradition that identifies the seizing of the prerogative to determine the nature of good and evil for oneself as the originating sin. One might say that the transition from the freedom for excellence to the freedom of indifference is tantamount to the fall.

A third negative feature of the American culture that must be resisted by the assimilating Church is the privatization of religion. Stanley Hauerwas has commented that the modern political states forged with religion a sort of peace treaty, the central stipulation of which was that the state would tolerate religious practice as long as it remained essentially a private matter.¹⁵ Richard John Neuhaus’s “naked public square,” that is to say, a political arena from which religious ideas and values have been aggressively excluded, is the fruit of this privatization. But authentic Christianity can never be privatized, precisely because it speaks of the creator God who grounds and rules all things. For biblical people, God is not one being among many—as in pagan, Deist, or nominalist conceptions—but rather the creator and ground of all finite things, *ipsum esse subsistens* rather than *ens summum*, in the language of Thomas Aquinas. But this means that all areas of life—the public and the private, the social and the individual, the natural and the conventional—belong to God and are related to God, much as the elements that make up the rose window are connected to the center. In point of fact, a thoroughly secular realm, an arena of life untouched by the sacred, is made possible only by an unbiblical reading of God. Accordingly, the Church cannot be one element among many within the society, a collectivity of persons blandly cultivating a private set of convictions; instead, it should be that institution which names the ways that God impinges on every aspect of existence and then encourages participation in the work of God. To be sure, the Christian Church enters into these realms non-violently and using only the power of persuasion—but it certainly doesn’t absent itself from them in a stance of false humility.

In regard to these three negative features—Hobbesian individualism, a modern conception of freedom as choice, and the privatization of religion—a robust Church should assume the stance that Augustine assumed vis-à-vis the corrupt society of ancient Rome, that is, one of honest and

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 70–88.

unambiguous opposition. Augustine attempted, in the *City of God*, neither correlation with nor accomodation to what he took to be the ersatz justice and peace of the Roman Empire. Instead, he named the sins of Roman social order and proposed an alternative, what he called the *civitas Dei*, an order predicated upon the worship of the true God.¹⁶ However, to remain within a purely reactive framework would be simplistic and counter-productive, for the assimilating Church is also eager to take in and take up what it can from the culture. It is to a consideration of this task that we now turn.

The Assimilating Church: The Positive Dimension

Thomas Aquinas is today probably the most revered and authoritative voice within the Catholic intellectual tradition. It is therefore easy to forget that, in his own time, he was anything but universally admired. In fact, the innovative synthesis of Aristotelian metaphysics and biblical revelation that he was affecting inspired a number of vocal opponents, one of whom famously commented that Thomas was diluting the wine of the Gospel with the water of a pagan philosopher. To this critique, Thomas deftly responded, "No, rather I am transforming water into wine." That retort of Aquinas beautifully expresses what Newman meant by the Church's assimilation of positive features of its environment: it does not simply absorb them; it elevates and perfects them, in accord with the great Catholic principle *gratia supponit et perfecit naturam*. As I have already hinted, one problem with a beige Catholicism is that it is incapable of defending itself against truly hostile features of the wider culture, but a second and perhaps even more dangerous problem is that it remains incapable of appropriately transfiguring the positive dimensions of that same culture.

A particularly good example of this process of elevating assimilation is the manner in which John Paul II embraced the human rights tradition of the Western democracies, especially the United States, becoming by the end of the twentieth-century its most passionate advocate on the world stage. Now at first blush this seems odd, given the rather harsh criticism of the Hobbes-Locke-Jefferson articulation of human rights that was offered in the previous section. A distinction is in order. For the modern political tradition, human rights flow, ultimately, from desire. Hobbes felt that we have a right to life and the avoidance of violent death precisely because those are the things that we most passionately, indeed inevitably, want. Locke expressed the same idea with admirable laconicism: we have a right to those things that we cannot not desire, namely, life and its essen-

¹⁶ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380–92.

tial supports of liberty and property. Jefferson took in this Lockean understanding, only replacing property with the pursuit of happiness.

But John Paul II understood human rights within a different framework. As a biblical person, he saw them as grounded, not so much in the power of subjective desire, as in the facts of creation and redemption. Freely created by God and mercifully redeemed by Jesus Christ, every individual, no matter her background, education, skill level, ethnic origin, etc., is a subject of inviolable dignity and worth. And from this identity flow rights and a claim to justice. For Thomas Aquinas, whom John Paul follows here carefully, justice is the act of rendering to each what is due, and what is due to each person is respect, love, protection, freedom, and the basic necessities of life. Thus, when John Paul spoke glowingly and sincerely of the human rights tradition in our country, he was claiming ideas that were still too redolent of Hobbes and elevating them into a new, evangelical framework. He was creatively assimilating a key feature of the secular culture into the organic life of the Church.

A second most important positive dimension of our political culture is our experiment in civilized pluralism. When John Paul II came to Chicago in 1978, he celebrated Mass on the lakefront, preaching to a typically American crowd drawn from numerous races, backgrounds, and religious persuasions. In the course of his homily, he commented positively on the American national motto *e pluribus unum*, observing that it is an echo of the Church's call to draw the many nations of the world into unity around Christ. The biblical theologian N.T. Wright has said that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was in continuity with the ancient hope that the tribes of Israel would one day be gathered and that through a renewed Israel, the tribes of the world would be gathered into unity around the right worship of God.¹⁷ Wright has further argued that the Church understands itself, in accord with Paul's musings in the ninth through eleventh chapters of Romans, to be the new Israel, which is to say, the instrument through which God has chosen to unite the myriad languages, peoples, and cultures of the world into one body of interdependent cells, molecules, and organs. What John Paul was recognizing was the manner in which the American motto expressed a kind of participation in and anticipation of this full eschatological drawing of the many into one. And what he implied, therefore, is that an assimilation of the American political practice of ordered unity in diversity would be a desideratum.

But what precisely is the nature of this practice? John Courtney Murray argued throughout his career that the separation of church and

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 203–4.

state and the granting of full religious liberty should be construed as “articles of peace,” that is to say, ways of fostering civil conversation and practical cooperation among those who entertain varying religious and philosophical perspectives.¹⁸ Neither should be read as religious indifference or as an invitation to the privatization of the faith and the stripping bare of the public square. Rather, they are the means by which those who disagree most radically can nevertheless find a sort of practical unity. And in this, the articles of peace are grounded in the instincts of the natural law, which are, on Aquinas’s own reading, a participation in the fullness of the eternal law which was made manifest in revelation. Perhaps this is why the fathers of Vatican II were willing, in *Dignitatis Humanae*, to “baptize” the distinctively modern practice of separating church and state and recognizing religious liberty as a fundamental right. And perhaps this is why both Murray and John Paul II were willing to appreciate *e pluribus unum* as a real though imperfect echo of the Church’s own voice.

I should like to indicate a link between Murray’s articulation of American liberalism and that of Jeffrey Stout. In his *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout contends that a healthy, American-style pluralism is not ideologically opposed to the presence of religion in the public conversation. Rather, it is, as Murray suggested, simply a means of adjudicating disputes in a civil manner among people with radically different conceptions of the whole.¹⁹ Such non-ideological liberalism is not opposed to the respectful and thoughtful injection of religious convictions into political discourse. As prime examples of this style of religious speech in the public square, Stout offers the second inaugural address of Abraham Lincoln and the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King.²⁰ Addressing the nation in a political discourse as the Civil War was coming to a close, Lincoln spoke in the cadences of an Old Testament prophet, using explicitly biblical language and referencing the punishment, providence, and mercy of God. And King, speaking in a public forum on an issue of pressing political significance (and standing on the steps of Lincoln’s memorial), drew massively on the moral and spiritual heritage of his Christian tradition. Neither Lincoln nor King should be read as blurring the distinction between church and state or as attempting to impose a sectarian vision on the nation. Rather, each creatively and non-aggressively introduced his most deeply-felt religious convictions into the public forum. One could argue

¹⁸ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 56–57.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 129ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

that Mario Cuomo's famous distinction between personal conviction and public performance represents a ham-handed resolution of what Lincoln and King handled so deftly. In fact, Cuomo's sharp dichotomization seems more in line with the ideological brand of liberalism urged by John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas, whereby religion as such must be excluded from properly public forms of political speech. It seems to me that kind of American pluralism advocated by Murray and Stout is what the Church can and should assimilate to itself.

A third positive element in the American political culture is the idea of a limited government, carefully structured through a system of checks and balances. G. K. Chesterton commented that the single greatest contribution of Christianity to the West was the doctrine of original sin: the deep conviction that there is something wrong with us at a level so elemental that we cannot, even in principle, fix it on our own. Both classical and modern philosophy come together in advocating a version of human perfectibility. Plato and Aristotle thought that we could reach full flourishing through growth in knowledge and virtue, and Marx and Hegel thought that we could achieve the same end through institutional change and social progress. Against both stands biblical Christianity. A constant theme of the Scriptures is that, left to their own devices, human beings tend to go bad. Even the heroes of the Bible—Moses, Jacob, Abraham, Isaiah, Elijah—are riven with flaws and stand constantly in need of divine grace. More to it, there is no literature anywhere in the world that is so consistently critical of government and governors than is the Bible. When the people of Israel ask for a king, the prophet Samuel warns them: "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to chariots to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots. . . . He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. . . . He will take one tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves" (1 Sam 8:11–17). How perennial sounds that description; how it seems to flow from today's headlines! When the people persist in asking for kings so that they might be like the other nations, YHWH proceeds to give them, beginning with Saul, a line of some of the most dysfunctional, stupid, murderous, and idolatrous leaders in human history. Even David, the best of Israelite kings, is an adulterer and a murderer. It is as though YHWH is saying, "I told you about these kings!"

Men and women formed by these biblical stories and by the doctrine of original sin will be profoundly skeptical of government and its officers, and they will embody their suspicion institutionally in a number of

ways. Thus our founders determined that political leaders would be subject regularly to the scrutiny of the electorate and that they would, even while exercising power, be watched, checked, questioned by many others, both inside and outside of the government. The congress watches the president and the president checks the congress; the judiciary watches both of them, and appointments to the judiciary flow from congress and the president. And everyone is critiqued by a skeptical and free press, which is, in turn, disciplined through the dynamics of the market. This is a system born of the experience of being tyrannized; and it is one with which Samuel the prophet would be rather sympathetic.

But even more fundamentally, the idea of a limited government is grounded in the biblical sense that law and justice do not flow finally from the government but from God. That law and political institutions are “under God” was a conviction of both the emancipation movement in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement of the twentieth. Martin Luther King could write his letter from the Birmingham City Jail, urging civil disobedience, precisely because he knew that unjust laws and cruel social practices can and should be challenged through appeal to an authority higher than the government. Interestingly, King, in that very letter, appealed to Thomas Aquinas, who taught the legitimacy of resistance to tyrants and to unjust law.²¹ Thomas’s permission of civil disobedience was rooted in his understanding of positive law as a declension of the natural law, which is itself a declension of the eternal law, which is identical to the divine mind. In the final analysis, the simplest traffic regulation, if it is just and good, is expressive of God’s providential care for his world, and the most respected and venerable social practice, if it is unjust, runs counter to God’s purposes. The great Catholic tradition knows that when the connection between the positive law and the natural law is severed, totalitarianism, of either the left or right, follows. Therefore, this rich American instinct that government should be limited and disciplined both from without and from within is something that the Church can very much assimilate to itself and adapt to its purposes.

Conclusion

As I suggested at the outset, the question is not whether the Church ought to engage in a dialogue with the wider culture, but rather *how*. To deny the legitimacy of that conversation altogether is to revert into

²¹ Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 293.

sectarianism, and as Henri de Lubac reminded us long ago, the Church of Jesus Christ can never be a sect. Even when it consisted entirely of Mary and John at the foot of the cross, it was universal in form and purpose. I have tried to argue that the Schleiermacherian style of interfacing with the culture—massively influential for the past two hundred years—is both practically ineffective and theologically questionable. And I have proposed the model of an assimilating Church, neither defensive nor acquiescent, capable of both holding off what it must and taking in what it can.

This approach, I hold, mimics the style of the greatest theologians of culture in the Catholic tradition—Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, Balthasar—and is congruent with the style and substance of the Vatican II documents. St. Paul told us that, in Christ's light, we should test every spirit, rejecting what is bad and retaining what is good; he also instructed us to bring every thought captive to Christ. The method that I've advocated honors those Pauline directives. **N.V.**

