

Challenging the Terms of Liberalism: On *The Politics of Virtue*

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WITH THEIR RECENT book *The Politics of Virtue*,¹ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst take a decisive step in the ongoing critique of liberalism. Not only do they articulate in a compelling way why the current crises of liberal institutions (which only those blinded by ideology can still deny) were all but inevitable given the founding principles of liberalism, but they also show, in relentlessly concrete terms, what a “post-liberal” alternative might look like. This latter contribution is something quite new, and quite helpful.

The fundamental significance of this contribution ought not to be overlooked, and reflecting on it gets us immediately to the heart of the matter. One of the primary reasons for the triumph of liberalism in the West—and indeed, at this point, arguably in the world simply—is that it changed the very terms of the debate, so to speak, and did so in such a way as to make its triumph inevitable. To put the matter somewhat oversimply, it deposed truth as the standard by which reality is measured and, in a certain sense, replaced it with nothing at all, insofar as having a standard of any genuinely transcendent sort inevitably brings one back inside a horizon set by truth (as Plato showed over and over again). Radically new approaches to theology, metaphysics, anthropology, and physics are entailed by this shift that may, on the surface, appear to be little more than a new

¹ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). Citations to page numbers in this book will be made parenthetically in text and notes.

approach to politics and economics. This shift is a disruption of the previous tradition that is more radically new, at least in a certain respect, than even God's self-revelation in Christ, since the latter is the revelation of the God who created all things, including the nature presupposed and perfected by the gift of grace.² Ultimately, liberalism is in this sense a breaking of the analogy of being, and if there is a metaphysical equivalent of the sin against the Holy Spirit, the destruction of the analogy of being would be it, insofar as it finally renders metaphysics itself impossible. Because the shifting of terms entails a new theology and metaphysics, a critique of liberalism must address it at this level. But because liberalism is most directly a political philosophy, the critique has to be carried through to the level of prudential judgments concerning concrete matters. There are few who can do both, and the present authors are among those few.

According to the authors, liberalism is a kind of absolutizing of the individual: "Liberalism . . . exhibits in all its variants an individualist consistency" (45). And, as we see clearly in Hobbes, Spinoza, Harrington, and Locke, it is committed to a reductive rationalism in politics that coincides with its ontological individualism: "A reigning individualism is inseparable from this rationalism and from opposition to any Catholic conception of the role of the Church" (46). This ontological individualism relentlessly undermines any gathering up of genuine unities, genuinely cohesive wholes, whether this be understood at the level of social or political order, culture, economics, philosophy, or others. It is just this fragmentation that ensures the victory of liberalism: it no longer needs to give *reasons* for its superiority, for reason itself has been emptied of substance. The only thing left is effective force in its various manifestations, above all technology, majority opinion, the machinery of state, and the movement of history, which gets dubbed "inevitable." Liberalism wins because it has always neutralized in advance any competitor.

It is in relation to this point that the authors' achievement stands out so brilliantly. By introducing a concrete alternative to liberalism, they not only provide a competitor, or at least outline in plausible terms what a competitor might look like, but even more fundamentally, in doing so, they reinstate, at least in principle, the classical terms of the debate, terms that are necessary for there even to *be* any

² Because of the unity between creation and redemption, there will always necessarily be in Christianity a certain *continuity* with pre-Christian thought that coincides with the essential discontinuity.

kind of debate in the first place. In impressive detail, Milbank and Pabst show that the liberal institutions that we have come to take for granted—capitalism, democracy, and so forth—were far from eternally necessary, but are contingent realities founded on certain philosophical assumptions that were adopted in lieu of others and in particular historical circumstances that were not in fact inevitable. At the same time, this contingency, by its very nature, raises the possibility of genuine alternatives, which the authors lay out in exceedingly concrete terms—to the point of making realistic policy proposals. If the concreteness of the proposals, which venture into properly prudential matters, makes some of their positions difficult to extend beyond the particularities of England (for one example among many, see the section entitled “Changing the Composition and Selection of the House of Lords” on 257), the very fact of presenting concrete proposals has general significance. (One of the most striking things about this book is the compelling argument that liberalism can only pretend to be realistic; as a matter of fact, the “post-liberal” alternative has firmer grounds for making that claim.) Such concrete detail, resonating with an articulation of its governing assumptions, allows the full engagement of the imagination along with one’s reason. The book thus enables one genuinely to envision a non-liberal reality. In the face of a real alternative, liberalism finds itself in the unusual position of having to justify itself by giving an *argument* for its basic positions.

It becomes quickly apparent that, having never really exercised these muscles, as it were, liberalism simply cannot defend itself. Milbank and Pabst set the problems of liberalism into stark relief by characterizing them not simply as a *crisis* in the various institutions, but as a “metacrisis.” This characterization serves to reveal that the crisis, in each case, concerns not just some discrete element inside the system that can be redressed by the resources the system itself provides, but the very principles on which the system is founded and brings to realization. The problem lies in the very terms of the problem: the very resources liberalism would use to remedy its crises serve only to reinforce them. In this respect, a response that would aspire to adequacy demands the broadening and deepening of the imagination in just the way described. In saying this, it is nevertheless important to recognize that Milbank and Pabst are not presenting a facile dismissal, a “root and branch” critique that can afford to be as outrageous as it wishes because it can take comfort from the secure

knowledge that it will never be taken seriously. Instead, the authors are perfectly clear about both the shortcomings *and* the achievements of liberalism, specifying what is at stake in each case with a dispassionate objectivity that gives their basic assessment great force.

Given the present context, and because of the concreteness of their various proposals, it would not make sense to attempt to present a general exposition of the arguments in the book. Instead, in the brief remarks that follow, I will first set into relief an aspect of their critique that I have found especially illuminating, which is the basic logic they identify that turns up analogously in the various spheres of the political order they address. I will then try to formulate the logic they articulate in more directly metaphysical terms in order to connect it, so to speak, more obviously with the classical tradition. Finally, I will suggest what seems to me to be a way in which they themselves fall into a liberal logic at the highest level of their analysis: their particular interpretation of religion, or even more specifically, in the way they privilege the Anglican model of the Church–state relation.

In the course of their discussion of capitalism, one of the most powerful of all the liberal institutions, the authors uncover a particular phenomenon that they say lies at the foundation of this particular institution but arguably governs analogously *all* of the institutions and cultural realities they address: “The division of cultural symbolic reality into pure abstraction and pure materiality” (114). “Cultural symbolic reality” is not simply one aspect of reality among others; it is rather a point of convergence around which all of human existence turns. To break this reality apart, then, is to undermine precisely that which holds human existence together. What the authors mean by this “division” is the dissociation of the symbol, which is originally an organic whole, into its constituent parts, meaning and matter, each of which is radically transformed in itself in its isolation from the other. The material thing, in this case, becomes mere stuff, without meaning, and thus comes to present objects of manipulation, exchange, thoughtless exploitation, and so forth. These impoverished pieces of matter lose any of the ontological “density” that comes with having an intrinsic meaning of their own that would anchor whatever use might be made of them in a sphere that transcends that use. To refer to this meaning as “symbolic” reveals that its intrinsic character is not opposed to the relativity implied in art and culture, but is inclusive of the creativity involved in these spheres. It also immediately

implies a rooting of intrinsic meaning in a material substrate, as it were. Thus, on the other hand, when the symbolic unity is broken, the meaning loses, in a parallel fashion, the substance of real extension in space and time. It becomes, in this respect, altogether abstract, and thus itself meaningless, a manipulable cipher, turning at best into the *ideal* that the authors so carefully distinguish from the *idea* in the properly Platonic sense (which is close to the “symbolic” as they use the term; see 293). The result is what one might call a metaphysical schizophrenia: “For the new human construct [offered by liberalism] is . . . schizophrenic—a hybrid of the *purely* animal and the *purely* and arbitrarily artificial, as if reason, sociality, creativity, and the political architectonic of virtue were in no way our *natural* destiny. But this model does not work, as we now know, even for beavers” (51).

The example the authors offer in this particular context of such a convergence of meaning and matter is the house, which is of course a real thing in the world but is obviously much more than mere *stuff*: it is a bearer of deep “emotional significance” (114) that is inseparable from its material existence. A house, indeed, has more than simply emotional significance: it also communicates and actualizes one’s “place” in a community and the community’s “place” in one’s existence; it organizes one’s family life, which lies at the basis of human existence; it opens space in which one receives guests, and thus represents a kind of crystalizing of the “self–other” relation; it has, in short, personal meaning, economic meaning, aesthetic meaning, social meaning, and political meaning. One could even show its metaphysical meaning (as Heidegger, for example, has done) and its theological meaning. But the notion of symbol is not limited simply to artifacts, even if these are the most obvious examples. In the end, every real thing is analogously a symbol: it is a complex whole, interwoven, so to speak, of meaning and matter, which belong inseparably to each other.³ The key is the *givenness* of this unity, which is to say, its a priori character: if the elements are sundered from each other, they can never simply be reassembled without converting the thing into something else. A genuinely symbolic reality can be recognized only as such; it can never be fabricated simply *de novo*. Whatever elements of creativity and “construction” symbols invariably include, these always have their place inside a more fundamental acknowledgment

³ If the “utility” dimension, the meaning for others (as distinct from intrinsic meaning), is more obvious in artifacts, the “inseparability” is more obvious in natural things, but neither of these can ever simply be separated from the other.

of what is already given.⁴ Symbols are always more basically received than they are made.

Now, this last point is what reveals liberalism to be more than just a particular political philosophy alongside others. Instead, it indicates a basic disposition toward the whole of reality, and thus at the same time toward the origin of all reality, God himself. Is the world *most basically* a gift, or is it most basically an object, an instrument of human projects? In the former case, the *symbol* takes a certain preeminence; it acquires an analogously sacral character that demands protection, cultivation, and the formation of character adequate to it—in a word, it demands a full-fledged “politics of virtue.” In the latter case, by contrast, we have a relentlessly self-subverting dialectic between mere matter and abstract meaning in which functions, instrumental purposes, and exchange values trump every *given* thing. Instead of a politics of virtue, we have a “biopolitics,” an artificial organization of mere animal existence, a reduction of the *eu zein*, which Aristotle said defines the essence of political life, to the mere *zein* he says is simply its occasioning condition. This dialectic represents an ever-futile attempt to remedy the original dissolution. Milbank and Pabst present the various faces of this fragmenting dialectic with great perspicacity: there is the technocratic governance of liberalism (48ff.) that both absolutizes the preservation of the individual (rights and property) and at the same time builds violence *into* the foundation of political order (57–58); there is the reduction of the world to an instrument ordered to abstract value (capital), which coincides with an essentially boundless, primitive accumulation of sheer matter (114–18); there is an undermining of political representation (which is of course essentially symbolic in the deep sense of the term), and a transformation of democracy “into a [passively received] spectacle of general mass opinion” (193); we have the relegation of meaning to the purely subjective, private sphere, which removes it from the public realm wherein it would acquire cultural substance and thus provide the foundation for education (253); there is the evacuation from the body (and so gender) of intrinsic significance (271ff.) so that it becomes itself mere matter that functions publicly as nothing

⁴ The authors insightfully link the logic of symbol and that of gift: “Liberalism has exacerbated the ‘bio-political’ power of impersonal rule by endorsing the modern separation of nature from culture that rests upon the undoing of gift and symbol, which had rendered physical thing and implicit meaning inseparable” (253).

more than a springboard for identity politics; and, finally, we have the pursuit of national self-interest turning inexorably into imperial power (332ff.).

The reason that these are all forms of *dialectic* is that, in each case, we have a contradiction that demands a resolution, which turns out to be only another instance of the same contradiction. This is why liberalism has brought about various forms of a “metacrisis.” When matter and meaning are severed from each other, the matter demands a recognition of its significance, which it always excludes by its own definition, and the meaning demands realization, which it likewise excludes by its own definition. Each becomes absolute in itself, which means it cannot be integrated in a real way into anything else. And yet, because any given reality is inescapably *part* of some *whole*, its “absoluteness” will simply be violently overridden by the subsequent absoluteness of the greater whole. There is nothing more basic than the “unbuffered” individual in liberalism, but because the individual as thus abstracted and “atomized” is reducible to a mere unit without a face, without the intrinsic qualities given by belonging to a nature, a people, a world, and so forth, that individual counts for nothing at all in the larger view. The liberal individual is both everything and nothing, just like every other “token” at play in the various liberal institutions.

It has seemed to me helpful to connect the dialectical logic that Milbank and Pabst have brilliantly identified at work in these institutions with the classical metaphysical theme of the relationship between act and potency.⁵ From this perspective, we may define liberalism as the inversion of the classical order, which recognizes actuality as having ontological, logical, and in one respect, chronological priority over potency.⁶ The classical view affirms the relative priority of potency over actuality only in a secondary chronological sense, the sequentiality of moments in relation to a particular thing: whereas *chicken* in truth comes before *egg*, *this particular* egg precedes the chicken that will eventually emerge from it in the passing of

⁵ For a fuller exposition of the argument that will follow, see D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), esp. part 2.

⁶ To summarize Aristotle’s view, which he expounds in book 9 of the *Metaphysics*, in a brief compass, act is prior to potency: *ontologically*, insofar as an end is always presupposed in any change; *logically*, insofar as we define a potency by the act it is able to achieve, and not conversely; and *chronologically*, insofar as eternity always “precedes” the passage of time.

time. The nominalism, positivism, and rationalistic empiricism of liberalism entail the isolation and absolutization of this latter sense, which undermines any genuine primacy of act. In the place of *symbolic* unity, we have its etymological opposite, a “diabolical” logic (*sym-ballō* vs. *dia-ballō*, “to join together” vs. “to set at odds”), which breaks things asunder and pits what originally *belonged* together in a *given* whole against each other as entities in competition. In this case, a whole is *not* prior to its parts as an *actual* reality that informs, perfects, and orders the parts as parts, giving them a proper *substance* of their own and thereby “liberating” them (the authors’ observations about the role of hierarchy in this regard, though quite contrary to prevailing sentiments, are extremely important; see 192–93). Instead, the “potential” parts becomes more “real” than any actual whole they might happen to configure in one moment or another, and that whole becomes a mere function of the parts as a relative instrument. This means that the parts cannot be understood as belonging together in any larger reality that would give them a genuinely *intrinsic* relation to one another, but can only at best “co-operate” in the form of accidental convergence or deliberate contract. At the same time, because potency has been sundered from any prior ordering actuality, it comes to be “defined” as sheer indeterminacy, as generating order always *de novo* and wholly from below, as it were, which means the order is altogether contrived and has any reality at all only as long as the originating power actively sustains it. A liberal marriage can last only as long as the individual parties expressly want it to last.

While this inversion of potency and act might seem to grant unprecedented significance to the individual, the genuinely tragic irony is that potency, thus cut off from actuality, becomes wholly unreal and nothing at all from the perspective of any reality outside of itself. The granting of essentially unlimited (because indeterminate) power coincides with the elimination of any real significance. This irony comes to expression, for example, in the coincidence the authors perceptively describe of the absolutizing of atomized individual self-interest, on the one hand, and the unlimited subjection of all individuals to essentially bureaucratized, centralized-state power, on the other hand (see, e.g., 51), or the destruction of real, qualitative property in favor of “paper money,” wholly abstract purchasing power now become an end in itself (102). If this analysis is true (and it seems hard to deny), we can see why characterizing liberalism as a “metacrisis,” a crisis that reaches down to first principles—in this

case, the rock-bottom classical principle of the priority of act over potency—is perfectly apt.

In the light of this formulation of the critique of liberalism, we may now turn to assess what is arguably the most fundamental question in the theme of political order, especially in the modern era: the relation of Church and state and the interpretation of the nature of religion (and indeed the nature of God simply) that is implied by that relation. At the root of the classical priority of act over potency, and altogether inseparable from that metaphysical principle, is a recognition of God as pure act, the fullness of perfection. If act is prior to potency, then the absolute first cause of all things cannot but be the highest actuality, that than which nothing can possibly be more actual. It follows that liberalism cannot invert the classical relationship between potency and act without at the very same time transforming the nature of God, so to speak. At the heart of the rise of liberalism, its very first order of business, as it were, is the potentializing of God, and along with this, the potentializing of religion. There is no space here to work out all of the details, but it is worth noting that the late-medieval school of thought known as nominalism, which identified *potentia absoluta* (i.e., potency unrelated to any actuality), as distinct from *potentia ordinata* (potency in relation to actuality), as God's most essential trait, is typically identified as the deep root of modernity. More proximately, the profound revision of reality in liberalism coincides with a recognition of religious pluralism, which is to say a notion that (generic) religion is taken to present a number of (specific) options, each of which performs the same function to a more or less adequate degree. This particular description of religious pluralism, it is crucial to note, differs fundamentally from the Western pre-modern inter-action of relatively distinct religious traditions—the Christian, the Jewish, the Muslim—precisely because these were recognized as *traditions*, or even more properly as belonging in a meaningful way to a single tradition, rather than as options. To recognize that one belongs in fact to a tradition is to acknowledge the primacy of actuality in relation to potency: I do not “choose” a religion, but rather receive it as something *given*, as part of the tradition to which I belong (indeed in a fundamental way as encompassing that tradition), as part of a whole, membership in which constitutes my identity prior to any choice. (This does not at all exclude free assent or the conversion to a particular faith, which of course includes freedom, but it interprets these as a being taken up *into* tradition

rather than as the fundamentally indifferent selection of an option.) Hegel was therefore correct to say that the Protestant Reformation, the fragmentation of the Christian tradition, is the *sine qua non* for the emergence of modern political thought—of liberalism.⁷ While some think of liberalism as a practical response to the problems of the historical violence this fragmentation entailed, the truth is that whatever practical decisions the emergence of liberalism entailed—like every single practical decision without exception—were made possible by a particular conception: in this case, the conception of one's religion as an option. In other words, in this transformation, that which is highest and most fundamental, one's "religion," *the concrete reality of one's relation to God*, is rendered one possibility among many, even if it is the possibility one has wholeheartedly chosen, which means that actuality is *in an ultimate way* subordinated to potency.

Now, Milbank and Pabst do not discuss the historical, philosophical, and theological origins of liberalism in this particular book, but one can gather, both from other publications and from implications of things they do in fact affirm in this book, that they would not fundamentally disagree with the (very brief) account I just gave, even if they would put the matter in different terms (and perhaps would not simply be of one mind themselves on the details). Their affirmation of the classical priority of act over potency and whole over parts at this "ultimate" level comes to expression, for example, in two positions they adopt that are about as contrary to the regnant liberal mind as anything one can find in print: a defense not only of a monarchy, but specifically of an *anointed king*, responsible in a basic way both for men's bodies *and also* for their souls,⁸ and a defense of an established church in a commonwealth, which they take care to distinguish from a theocracy.⁹ Obviously, they have England in mind as a model in both cases.

⁷ In the remark on § 270 in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes: "Far from it being, or ever having been, a misfortune for the state if the Church is divided, it is *through this division alone* that the state has been able to fulfill its destiny as self-conscious rationality and ethical life. This division is likewise the most fortunate thing which could have happened to the Church and to thought as far as their freedom and rationality are concerned" (*Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 302).

⁸ See 215–20. This point is so fundamental to the argument of the book that the striking quotation from Hooker the authors use to make it (220) also appears as one of the book's epigraphs.

⁹ 230–32. In fact, they argue, persuasively, that such a thing is one of the best ways to *avoid* a theocracy (232). Aquinas, too, makes this argument in *De regno* 15.

While these positions may be controversial enough to cause many readers simply to dismiss the entire book and its claims out of hand, thus bearing witness to the fact that liberalism simply cannot tolerate any alternatives to itself and refuses to give reasons for its own positions in relation to alternatives, a more genuinely open mind might see how much wisdom and good sense there is in these defenses. There is no space here to enter into a detailed exposition and evaluation of the cases they make, but it is worth highlighting their excellent argument that an established church actually enhances the meaning of religious liberty more generally, insofar as it opens up a space of genuine substance *in* the political order that would allow, in principle, a more adequate role, and so respect, for other religious traditions.

It lies beyond my competence to make a proper judgment on the matter of the nature of kingship as it exists in England and how it has developed over history, or on the matter of the precise character of the Church of England and its official status. But I wish simply to raise a question in light of the critique of liberalism that the authors themselves mount, and specifically in light of the formulation I have proposed above in terms of the relation between potency and act. Is it, in the end, possible to make the Church of England the highest religious authority, even for this particular people, without building the liberal paradigm into the very foundation and accepting the inversion of the classical priority of act over potency as ultimate? I mean to raise this as a genuine question, though there seem to me to be grounds for answering the question in the negative.

From what I understand—though I confess again the limits of my knowledge of such matters—there are among Anglicans those who call themselves “Anglo-Catholic” and mean by that, among other things, to acknowledge an organic link, a continuity, between the Church of England and the original Christian tradition, and to distinguish this church from Protestantism in general, which understands itself as *protesting*, as breaking with the Christian tradition in its actuality (a break compatible with efforts to recover the “early Church” beyond the mediation of the actual tradition). But even with respect to “Anglo-Catholics,” the question remains whether one can recognize the *actuality* of the Christian tradition without acknowledging an actual office representing that tradition *specifically in its universality*. In other words, the priority of actuality over potency, of whole over part, requires—I submit—the acknowledgment of an actual magisterium as interpreter of the tradition and an actual chair as representing the objective unity of the Church throughout the ages and beyond

the particularity of the churches belonging to specific nations and communities.¹⁰ In a word, the priority of act over potency requires the recognition of the pope.¹¹ As the authors themselves recognize, it is not at all an accident that Locke's *Letter on Toleration*, one of the "founding documents" of liberalism, expresses a capacity to accommodate any version of Christianity, even the Church of England, apart from Roman Catholicism: "The advocacy of toleration by Locke and others was in reality an advocacy of civic indifference, and his exclusion of Catholics from toleration was not an 'exception' to his theory, but, rather, its whole basis, since for Catholic doctrine, such indifference is unacceptable" (46).¹² Because the head of the Church of England is not *actually* outside of the state, but simultaneously its head, at least in a certain respect,¹³ this church too can be

¹⁰ For an argument on both sides of this issue, see the well-known debate between Cardinal Ratzinger and Cardinal Kasper: on September 19, 2001, the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* published an address entitled "Ecclesiology of the Constitution on the Church, Vatican II, Lumen Gentium" that Ratzinger had given at a symposium in November of the previous year (2000); between the symposium presentation and the *L'Osservatore Romano* publication, Kasper had responded to the presentation in "On the Church: A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger," *America* 184, no. 14 (April 23, 2001); and Ratzinger's further response to Kasper appeared as "The Local Church and the Universal Church: A Response to Walter Kasper," *America* 185, no. 16 (November 19, 2001).

¹¹ There are of course questions that would have to be sorted out regarding the history of the emergence of the papacy, perhaps especially in its modern form, in relation to the college of bishops, but in sorting these out, one has to face the basic question of whether it is good and fitting that there be an *actual*—i.e., a concrete and real—embodiment of the unity of the Church that transcends the particularity of times and places that belongs to local churches. It is also necessary to recognize that there is a fundamental difference between a more general openness to actual Christian unity that existed *prior* to the historical emergence of the papacy and the kind of openness to the universal Church that is possible *after* an actual rejection of papal authority.

¹² As we will argue below, the incompatibility of Catholicism and the liberal notion of toleration espoused by Locke turns specifically *on the Chair of Peter*, and only thus on things like the continuity of tradition, an organic and non-individualistic sense of the Church, and so forth.

¹³ The authors insist, quite helpfully, on the importance of the fact "that it is the independent sovereignty of the Crown and not the Crown in Parliament that was made head of the Church at the outset," thus underscoring the *distinction* between the king as head of the Church and the king as head of the state, and also that the Church of which he is the head exceeds England in the narrow sense. But one may nevertheless wonder whether this formal distinction can be sustained as such. Can such a distinction do justice in the end, for example,

taken up under the liberal umbrella. It seems that, in the end, it is only that “foreign potentate,” the pope, whose headship embraces the churches of *every* country, that stands outside the umbrella.¹⁴

The problem characterized here in very general terms comes to expression in the *Politics of Virtue* when, for example, the authors appear to concede a liberal description of religion at a decisive point in their argument and explicitly connect this with what appears to be a liberal conception of political order: “Even though the Church of England represents one particular religious option assented to by a national majority across time, the perceived basis of the collective assent in individual conscience logically requires respect for all consciences, including dissenting ones—as has come to be accepted in the course of time and was advocated by some from the early modern outset” (231). There are many things to highlight in this sentence. (1) The Church of England is presented as a “particular religious option,” rather than as an embodiment of the actual Christian tradition, the extension of this tradition, so to speak, into the particularities of England. (2) Even more revealingly, though ultimately connected with the first point, the reality of the Church of England, its *actuality* as the established Church, is characterized explicitly as *resulting from* the will of the majority (in other words, the actuality is generated by the accumulated potency, and so ultimately subordinated to it). Note that there is nothing said about the *truth* of the Church of England: its being the established Church is not an expression of the *truth* of Christianity. One can imagine Chesterton asking, “is there ultimately any other reason to establish a Church other than because it is true?” (3) The majority will, in typical liberal fashion,

to the subordination of the king to the priest (ultimately the pope) that Aquinas affirms in the *De regno* as essential to the unity in difference of a Christian political order? The English sovereign does indeed receive anointing from the bishop, but the bishop is subordinate to him insofar as he is the actual authority of the Anglican Church. Logically, the king ought to anoint himself, but only after he has already anointed himself, which implies, of course, an insoluble contradiction. The only way out, it seems to me, is for the king to receive his anointing from the actual head of the Church, from the pope, according to the ancient Christian tradition.

¹⁴ To be sure, a properly Catholic understanding of the relation between Church and state is an extremely complex and delicate matter that we cannot address here. For the beginning of an attempt to think through this relation in terms of the classical metaphysical theme of act and potency, see my article “Liberalism, Religious Freedom, and the Common Good: The Totalitarian Logic of Self-Limitation,” *Communio* 40 (Summer/Fall 2013): 577–615.

is interpreted as the collective expression of individual consciences. And (4), ultimately, it is specifically the collective expression of individual consciences, in their self-generating actuality, that is posited as the *basis* for the common assent, and *therefore* as the ground of respect for other individual consciences in their possible dissent. In other words, it is not the (non-liberal) *truth* of the dignity of the human being, and therefore of individual conscience, a truth that is by no means the result of majority will but is taken as *given* a priori and so as non-negotiable, that grounds respect, but the power of individuals *qua* individuals. This is nothing other than Locke's conception of natural law put in more contemporary terms.

As we saw, Milbank and Pabst are insistent that what most essentially characterizes liberalism is an atomized individualism. It is difficult to see how this final collapse into the particularity of individual conscience regarding what is in fact most fundamental is not a paradigmatic instance of what the authors criticize. They rightly argue that real democracy must necessarily have a non-democratic foundation (191), but how do they then justify interpreting this ultimate case, the reality of one's relation to God, as a finally *democratic* foundation of a *non*-democratic reality, so to speak? Because it concerns the most ultimate matter, it is hard to see how, once one has founded actual religion on individual conscience, one can avoid having everything else said be colored by the basic tones of liberalism. It ought to be noted that, if actuality is subordinated to potency in the matter of religion, the language of truth will necessarily tend to disappear from the public sphere. In its place, one will tend to justify the highest things by the virtue of their social utility, which is what Robert Spaemann has described as the replacement of philosophy by sociology and, *thus*, as the origin of modernity (i.e., liberalism).¹⁵

As we suggested at the very beginning, there seems to be no third possibility in the end: either truth is supreme or we cannot escape from the insatiable maw of liberalism. Unless the a priori character of truth is acknowledged, there will be a tendency to collapse into majority opinion, no matter how broadly or thickly this may be conceived. Thus, Milbank and Pabst raise the obviously very difficult

¹⁵ See Robert Spaemann, "The Traditionalist Error: On the Sociologizing of the Idea of God in the Nineteenth Century," in *Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person: A Robert Spaemann Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37–44. If it is *only* theology, and not also metaphysics, that represents an alternative to sociology, then even theology cannot finally resist becoming a form of sociology.

question of the standard by which truth is ascertained as such and determine the response in the following way:

If coercion is abhorrent, then only the persuasion of the majority should prevail concerning questions that must be generally decided. But this seems to subordinate truth and the morally non-negotiable imperative to “do the truth.” What if the majority happen to be wrong? On the other hand, the imposition of perceived truth upon people against their will is not only distastefully violent, but also ineluctably risks a twisting and dilution of truth, if it is in consequence not “done freely.” The resolution of this conundrum must lie in a sense that, while new truth may first dawn upon the gaze of the lone visionary and be developed by her disciples, the ultimate clue to the certainty of the most important and fundamental truths is their general acceptability—not just to each and every one of us in dispersal but also to all of us taken together in community. For it is the communal realisability and illustration of truth that tends eventually to confirm it. (235)

We may leave aside the odd language of “new truth.” The authors take care here to avoid making popular acceptance the ultimate *criterion* for what counts as true (a “clue” is importantly different from a “criterion”), and it must be admitted that the ultimate criterion of truth is an extremely difficult and delicate matter. But one must nevertheless offer more than “general acceptability” as determinative in matters of foundational meaning. What is at stake here is the *ratio* of truth. In order to maintain a distinction between “clue” and “criterion,” one has to make clear that the aim of common deliberation in fundamental matters is finally a recognition of what is *true*, and not simply what is generally acceptable. In other words, to use the authors’ language, the “perceived basis of collective assent” cannot ultimately be individual conscience, but must be actual truth. Otherwise, there is in the end nothing beyond the *vox populi* to present the *vox Dei* (236; which, it must be said, has been a rule of thumb, so to speak, rather than a foundational principle).¹⁶ Does it

¹⁶ When Milbank and Pabst cite the adage, they clarify that it does not imply that the “collective will, simply because it represents the highest common factor of arbitration, should always prevail” (236). This is a crucial point, but it begs a basis for this distinction.

not remain the case that the majority of people can come to see things falsely? The authors, for example, go on (courageously) to defend the traditional notion of marriage and argue against the hubris of a state that would redefine marriage, simply disregarding what the world has recognized for ages (237). But is it inconceivable that a majority of thoroughly liberally formed individuals might come to accept so-called “same-sex marriage” as a matter of individual conscience? In this case, does their vote constitute the *vox Dei*? It is revealing to note on this question that the authors appear to have no recourse beyond an appeal to tradition: they cannot—or in any event, they do not—appeal simply to the *truth* of marriage, the *essential meaning* of nature, the *abiding teaching* of the magisterium of the Church, and so forth. In the end, if religion is *potentialized*, it seems we have nothing other than individual consciences to determine what is real. We have nothing other than liberalism.

The raising of this question is not at all a rejection of the argument of the book, but instead a suggestion that the book’s basic argument would seem to bear on this ultimate question in a manner subtly, but significantly, different from what the authors admit. A recovery of the priority of act over potency would seem to resonate with, and be enhanced in turn by, the invariably profound and insightful explorations and assessments of the institutions that surround us, enclosing virtually every aspect of our lives, and inform the world at large. Milbank and Pabst are two of the greatest living critics of liberalism, and their capacity to critique the form that virtually everyone takes for granted as a *ne plus ultra* horizon from within which we must think and do everything we think and do enables them to see things no one else can see. It is likely that the authors have a profound response to the question raised, but in any event, *The Politics of Virtue* will stand as one of the most provocative and fruitful contributions to the great conversation that continues to define our age, an urgently needed defense of the humanity “that liberalism tends to make . . . vanish in two directions: first, archaically in the face of the tide of pre-human nature by appealing to the lowest instincts such as greed, fearfulness and enmity; second, futuristically, in favour of a ‘post-human’ project that can hopefully subordinate human egotism and the unpredictability of desire to a cybernetic future that will augment the liberal ‘peace of a sort’ into an absolute bio-politics” (58).

As the authors powerfully show, a way of being, thinking, and doing that tends to dissolve the symbol and eliminate the properly human is diabolical indeed. An adequate response requires that we

challenge the terms of liberalism and recover the genuinely integrating center, the properly human, which itself images the most perfectly actual mediator, who outstrips both false directions because he is the Alpha and the Omega. N&V