

The Liberty of the Will in Theology Permits the Liberated Markets of Liberalism

Deirdre Nansen McCloskey

*University of Illinois at Chicago*¹

Abstract. The Abrahamic doctrine of liberty of the will can allow liberalism in the economy. For a century or so in academic theology, and stretching back to the early church and such revivals as the Radical Reformation, numerous Christian writers have denied such a liberalism. In the past century, for example, they have claimed that the Sermon on the Mount entails socialism, or at any rate a large welfare state. But socialism or even the welfare state is not entailed by the core tenets of Christianity. On the contrary, their opposite, liberalism in the old European definition yielded since 1800 a 3,000 percent increase of real income for the wretched of the earth. And, the point here, it did not cost them their immortal souls.

Keywords: free will, liberalism, intentionality, Catholic social teaching, social democracy

1. Recent theology criticizes liberalism

There is an intimate, and perhaps desirable, connection between liberty of the human will under Abrahamic theology and the liberty of human action under liberal economic ideology. The theology does not require a liberal economy, but a Christian conviction allows it. The proposal is not original. After all, a specifically Christian conviction about the efficacy of works of a liberated will coexisted in, say, the Italian city states with a specifically ‘capitalist’ conviction about the efficacy of liberated markets. Not all the businessmen of Florence ended up in one of Dante’s circles of hell.

But in the past century or so liberal ideology has been under suspicion in theological circles. In 1919 Paul Tillich, then a 33-year old Protestant pastor in Germany, wrote with Carl Richard Wegener an *Answer to an Inquiry of the Protestant Consistory of Brandenburg*:

¹ The paper was given at the conference on Democracy, Religion, and the Market, University of Virginia, Charlottesville in 2019 and then at the virtual follow-up conference in June 2020. I thank the participants, in particular Roger Finke, for their comments, and two anonymous referees for the new *Journal of Economics, Theology and Religion*.

The spirit of Christian love accuses a social order which consciously and in principle is built upon economic and political egoism, and it demands a new order in which the feeling of community is the foundation of the social structure. It accuses the deliberate egoism of an economy ... in which each is the enemy of the other, because his advantage is conditioned by the disadvantage or ruin of the other, and it demands an economy of solidarity of all, and of joy in work rather than in profit (Tillich and Wegener 1971 [1919]).

“Egoism” is a mischaracterization of “capitalism,” as Max Weber had argued in 1905. Greed, he wrote, is “not in the least identical with capitalism, and still less with its spirit. ... It should be taught in the kindergarten of cultural history that this naïve idea of capitalism must be given up once and for all” (Weber 1930 [1904-1905], 17).² The lust for sacred gold “has been common to all sorts and conditions of men at all times and in all countries of the earth.” Love is in fact the foundation of a market economy, as even some recent economists have argued, and as old Adam Smith (1976a [1759]) certainly did. And an “economy of solidarity” and top-down propaganda for a “feeling of community”—as communism and then fascism were about to show—yielded evil fruit. Yet economic theories similar to those of the two pastors, sweetly intended but decidedly non-liberal, are increasingly common.

By ‘liberal’ I do not mean the use of the term in the United States since about 1933, namely, “advocating a tentative democratic socialism.” Nor do I mean the cruelty of what the political left has come to call ‘neo-liberalism,’ as in many of Margaret Thatcher’s policies. I mean its use internationally, as on the Continent of Europe now, and its use originally, when in the late 18th century the word was coined—that is, a society of adults liberated from coercive hierarchies. Liberals admitted excursions for great externalities such as a plague, which cannot be solved any other way than by state action, though they recommended it be exercised with temperance and humility, not with the envy and anger of state-sponsored solidarity. Otherwise, no one was to impose on another a religious faith or way of life.

As a sober proposal for a non-policy of policy, *laissez nous faire*, it was a new idea, though with a long if somewhat thin tradition of radical egalitarianism behind it. Spartacus died in battle for it in 71 BCE, and in 1381 CE the defrocked priest John Ball was drawn and quartered for asking, “When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?” In 1685 the Leveller Richard Rumbold, facing his hanging, declared, “I am sure there was no man born marked of God above another; for none comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted and

² In his *General Economic History* (1981 [1923], 355), he writes, “the notion that our rationalistic and capitalistic age is characterized by a stronger economic interest than other periods is childish.”

spurred to ride him” (1961 [1685], 624). Few in the crowd gathered for the entertainment would have agreed with such anti-hierarchical sentiments. A century later, many more would have. By 1985 virtually everyone would, at any rate in official theory.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles (OED)*, “Liberalism 5a. Supporting or advocating individual rights, civil liberties, and political and social reform tending towards individual freedom or democracy with little state intervention” is first recorded in 1761 in David Hume’s *History of England to Henry VIII*. Under the phrase “at liberty,” the earliest quotation in the *OED* is from 1503, “That euery freman be at liberte to bye and selle eueri w^t other,” which is the point here—that liberalism is the permission to participate at liberty in, say, the economy, as in the polity or in the church, equally if a “freeman.” The novelty in the 18th century and beyond was that *everyone* was to be equally at liberty. The priesthood of all believers anticipated a governorship of all citizens.

An old idea in many theologies, of course, such as the Christian one, was that souls are created equal in dignity. But the secular extension in liberalism, peculiar at first to northwestern Europe, was an equality in permissions of all sorts, from religious to economic. The case is sometimes made that Western Christianity had been long preparing for such liberty, but it is weak (McCloskey 2020). The extension came rather suddenly in the 18th century, without anticipation in a decidedly illiberal Europe.

The *OED* again, speaks of liberty, sense 3a: “Freedom to do a specified thing; *permission, leave*” (my italics). In the opinion of radical liberals in the late 18th century such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, the lord-and-servant and priest-and-parishioner hierarchies natural to an agricultural society were to be overturned, to make the world anew. They imagined a liberal utopia, with no slaves or serfs, no beaten wives, no beaten protestors, no select permission granted in a special charter to petitioners following on a humble appeal to the noble lord, or to the bishop, or to a state functionary. Harmless permissions for the generality were to be laid on in all directions.

The extreme of the theory was literal anarchism, *an-archos*, no ruler, a theory animating among the Russians Count Tolstoy in traditional Christian form and Prince Kropotkin in secular evolutionary form, and among southern Europeans the numberless Italian and Spanish anarchists. But a broad-church liberalism can admit that some limited coercion and hierarchy in the form of laws against force and fraud, and taxes for a few common purposes, are desirable. It says merely that the realm of human coercion should be small, and the realm of human autonomy large. On liberty sense 3, the *OED* quotes John Stuart Mill (who admittedly had a hint of social democracy about him), in 1841: “The modern spirit of liberty is the love of individual independence.”³

³ On Mill’s double role, as the height of liberalism and the beginnings of social democracy, see Persky (2016).

Note the word “individual,” Kant’s “autotomy” of a rational being. The social cooperation that supplies our daily bread is to be achieved not mainly by coercive commands from human lords but mainly by voluntary agreements among equal souls. The cooperation is individual, not collective. It contrasts with “ancient liberty” as defined in 1819 by the Swiss philosopher Benjamin Constant (1988 [1819]), namely, the right to have a voice, to carry a shield in the phalanx. Modern liberty was the right to be left alone by a coercive state. The turn in England in the late 19th century to a “New Liberalism” re-focused on ancient liberty and its coercions. You are privileged to carry the shield, said philosophers such as T. H. Green and subsequently politicians such as David Lloyd George and Theodore Roosevelt, and you must. Such an anti-liberal and coercive “liberalism” is what most modern leftists recommend. Social liberalism and then democratic socialism is usually seen as a natural evolution, the obvious next step. It will unify us in collective projects, projects for which the majority of us, after all, have voted. But a society of non-slaves able to pursue their varied individual projects without approval by a majority seems to liberals to be a better end of history, more suited to humans (Fukuyama 1992; and McCloskey 2019).

In medieval English the plural ‘liberties’ meant *inequality* of permissions, as in the English Magna Carta of *Liberatum* (liberties) in 1215 affirming baronial privileges against the king. Compare the southern Dutch *Groot Privilegie* in 1477 affirming local privileges against Burgundian centralization.⁴ This person or that city was to have certain named and limited privileges, to run a market with specified frequency or to be exempted from specified taxes. The *OED* speaks of liberty sense 2c, “chiefly in plural, the entitlement of all members of a community.” The lexicographers note that in such a plural form it is “in early use not always distinguishable from sense 6a, now chiefly historical,” as in “the liberty” of the City of London granted to a specified person, and not at all to *hoi polloi*.

The liberal turn in the 18th century was so to speak from ‘liberties’ to ‘liberty,’ from unequal privileges to equal ones, ideally for all (though in fact at first only for free males with property). The core of modern liberalism, in other words, is equality of permissions. And so is the core of Christian theology, the equal permission granted to all to sin or not. In the early church and in the Radical Reformation bent on re-establishing the early church the equality was extended to all believers—though not in the Magisterial Reformation that came to dominate northern Europe.

Such a liberalism promised an equality, note, of *permissions*. It is not an equality of initial opportunity or of final outcome, to be expressed in material command over goods and services,

⁴ Thus, sense 6a in the *OED*’s entry on ‘liberty’: “Chiefly in plural. A privilege, immunity, or right enjoyed by prescription or grant. ... Now chiefly historical.”

which has been the socialist utopia since 1762 and Rousseau. The *OED*, in the entry on liberalism, quotes H. G. Wells in 1920 offering liberalism's epitaph, at a time when the British Liberal Party was dying, and collectivisms such as Wells supported were beginning to seem lovely: "The dominant liberal ideas were freedom and a certain vague equalitarianism." By 'vague' he means that it did not legislate equality of outcome. But equal permission to worship or to trade is not 'vague.' To be at liberty to gather as two or three in Christ's name, or to be at liberty to buy or sell with every other, are as concrete as can be, and related.

2. Liberalism is a society of non-slaves

True, a socialist utopia of equality of outcome echoed the early Christian one of equality in the face of an imminent *eskhaton*. But in its modern and secular form, especially in a society larger than a family or a monastery, such an equality entails subordination to a human master elevated in a hierarchy. If we are to rob Peter to pay Paul, in order to achieve end-state equality of goods, some lordly coercion is necessarily involved, whether aristocratic or democratic. And needless to say even families and monasteries have not usually been equal in permissions, not really. The *pater familias*, or the abbot, or the mother superior, was tempted, as recorded in numberless complaints in ancient and medieval literature and folklore, to take selfish advantage of superiority. Agamemnon took Briseis from Achilles, with known results. Equality of permissions by contrast opposes any coerced hierarchy of gender or status or race or office. It, too, of course, has an early Christian lineage: "there can be neither Judaeian nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there cannot be male and female, for you are all one in the Anointed One Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).⁵

Coerced end-state equality in goods and services, from Rousseau to central planning communism, an economist would note, distorts the messages we send by demand and supply to each other about our material priorities. To be sure, before God the souls of master and slave are equal. The liberal democrats of the 19th century extended such an equality to political dignities, the franchise and the assurance of equality before the law, to achieve a nation of the people, by the people, for the people. Yet we should, the liberal economist says, pay a brain surgeon more than a waiter, because (to give the usual utilitarian reasoning, as in John Rawls) in that case both of them in the end will be better off, putting aside in the short run any indulging of the sin of envy. If they were paid the same the services of surgeons would be grossly under-supplied, the services of waiters over-supplied. Forcing an equality of wages leads to lower income in total.

⁵ I will use throughout David Bentley Hart's (2017) translation. Hart makes a persuasive case in his Postscript that the New Testament leans socialist. Using his translation therefore will not bias the case in a liberal direction.

The argument for such a justified differential in pay is not so much the incentive to effort, though for learning to do brain surgery as against learning to wait tables it is a part of the story (a quite small part for Jeff Bezos incentivized to earn another billion). It is much more about sending the correct signals as to what in this vale of tears needs urgent augmentation. The economy is saying, “More brain surgeons, please. More re-inventions of the mail-order consolidators of a century ago in Sears, Roebuck or Montgomery Ward, please.”

Comprehensive equality of opportunity or of outcome is, anyway, not achievable. We are diverse in graces, and can benefit from accepting them so to speak gracefully, and then exchanging them: “There are differences in the graces bestowed. ... To each is given the Spirit’s manifestation for some benefit. ... [To one] realizations of deeds of power, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits” (1 Corinthians 12:4, 7, 10). Shakespeare lamented that he could not be “like to one more rich in hope, / Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, / [Having] this man’s art and that man’s scope.”⁶ The equality in goods and services imagined by Rousseau and the rest of the European socialist tradition does not make us equal in the God-given graces of height or beauty or intelligence or natural optimism or entrepreneurship or skill with a scalpel or luck of birth or length of life. By denying what the economists call ‘comparative advantage,’ a coerced equality of wages diminishes even the material riches of us all. A coerced equality of human heights or intelligence, likewise, would reduce the collective gains from such graces, by a Procrustean trimming of feet or by pounding nails into the heads of the gifted, to bring all to full equality. Coerced equality makes the poor poorer, thus violating Rawls’ (1971) collectivist concession to liberalism: that a further enrichment of the rich can be justified if the poor are thereby also enriched. For social policy, then, the pursuit of equality of opportunity or of outcome, as against comprehensive permission to work as a lawyer or to braid hair for a living, is a mistake.

For a Christian, further, equality of wages, at the beginning or at the denouement, seems oddly materialistic. Trying to achieve end-state equality of wages tempts us to the sins of envy and then anger against the brain surgeon, envying this man’s art and that man’s scope, as in the recent wave of populism. And in fact, contrary to the zero-sum ethic of the world in which Jesus and St. Paul lived, and contrary to its secular echo in recent claims about inequality, liberalism and its economic ideology of ‘innovism’ (a more economically and historically accurate word than the misleading ‘capitalism’) has resulted in fact in massive equalizing of real human comforts, materialistically speaking.⁷ The American economist John Bates Clark predicted in 1901 that “the

⁶ Sonnet 29. “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes.” At www.poetryfoundation.org/poems, accessed December 10, 2020.

⁷ Two economists report on the basis of detailed study of the individual distribution of income—as against comparing distributions nation-by-nation—that “world poverty is falling. Between 1970 and 2006, the global

typical laborer will increase his wages [in real terms, allowing for inflation] from one dollar a day to two, from two to four and from four to eight. Such gains will mean infinitely more to him than any possible increase of capital can mean to the rich. ... This very change will bring with it a continual approach to equality of genuine comfort” (Clark 1901). The prediction was accurate.

It is the illiberal hierarchies of coercion, not uncoerced exchanges—or so the Christian liberal claims—that tempt fallen humans to arrange unfair advantages in order to overturn the core equality of permissions. The American state enforces monopolies of doctors and electricians, by licensure preventing a free entry that would make the rest of us better off. The Dutch state keeps out new pharmacies that would reduce drug prices in the neighborhood. All states prevent consumers from being at liberty to buy and sell, everyone with another. States choose winners (though in fact regularly losers) in pursuit of industrial and innovation policy. In most places, with the exception of a handful of Swedens and New Zealands and Minnesotas, the state regularly takes from poor Peter to subsidize rich Paul. Most states are in this respect like China or Russia or, at best, the United States in Illinois and Louisiana.

Illiberalism re-establishes the hierarchy that once upon a time liberalism proposed to overturn. The fictional pig/commissar in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945, last page) declared that all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others. The literary critic Tzvetan Todorov reports that Margarete Buber-Neumann (Martin Buber’s daughter-in-law), “a sharp-eyed observer of Soviet realities in the 1930s, was astonished to discover that the holiday resorts for ministry employees were divided into no less than five different levels of ‘luxury’ for the different ranks of the communist hierarchy. A few years later she found the same stratification in her prison camp” (Todorov 2003 [2000], 83).

The very word ‘liberalism’ contains the program. ‘Liberal’ is of course from classical Latin *liber*, understood by the slave-holding Romans as (in the words of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*) “possessing the social and legal status of a free man (as opp. to slave),” and then *libertas* as “the civil status of a free man, freedom” (Glare 2012, 1023-5).

As is so often the case in English, however, there are paired words, the Latin-origin ‘liberty’ and the Germanic-origin ‘freedom.’ The two have relatively recently acquired slightly different connotations, and it is desirable to distinguish them if we are not to become muddled. ‘Liberty’ retains the political connotation of all people being non-slaves to other humans. ‘Freedom’ in English, though, has increasingly come to mean not subject to constraint by physics or, in

poverty rate [defined in absolute, not relative, terms] has been cut by nearly three quarters. The percentage of the world population living on less than \$1 a day (in PPP-adjusted 2000 dollars) went from 26.8% in 1970 to 5.4% in 2006” (Sala-i-Martin and Pinkovsky 2010; Sala-i-Martin 2006). “PPP-adjusted” means allowing for the actual purchasing power of local prices compared with, say, United States prices. It has become the standard, an improvement over using exchange rates (which are largely influenced by financial markets).

particular, by wages. Thus Franklin Roosevelt (1941) in his Four Freedoms speech numbered as third a freedom from want, and the economist Amartya Sen (1999) wrote of economic development as freedom. The trouble is that we already have words for such lack of want, or for economic development, namely, income, wealth, riches, capabilities, adequacies. To push together, as the modern English usage of ‘freedom’ does, the politics-word of non-enslavement to others (liberty) and the wage-word of ability to buy things from others (wages, wealth) leads only to confusion. The liberal claim, to be sure, is that liberty does result in an increased ability to buy things—and so it has done over the past two centuries. But for the claim to be meaningful its alleged truth needs to come from the evidence, not from a mis-definition of development as being freedom, *simpliciter*.

Classical Latin does not conceive of liberty as the choice to do what is morally good. Such is a Christian concept, and may be seen in Medieval Latin, as a step to somehow making human liberty consistent with obedience to God’s will. It is the issue between liberty of the will and determinism. But the issue is not to be resolved by merely redefining the will of humans to be exactly the will of God, as tempting as such a resolution is in the less liberal Christian traditions. Nor is Latin *libertas* simply ‘choice,’ as modern economists see it, *arbitrium*, the license to follow one’s impulses, be they good or evil (Glare 2012, 160). It is the condition of non-slavery, which is the point in liberalism—celebrating even poor people being, as illiberal early moderns in England put it (terrified by the very thought), ‘masterless.’

The slave societies in which Christianity grew up did not admire masterlessness, and waxed eloquent in favor of everyone having a master. St. Paul appears to have thought that slavery was unavoidable, even natural—for God made some slaves and other free. In the Letter to Philemon he sends a fugitive slave back to his master, though asking the master to liberate him, considering the services (he uses commercial language) that the slave had rendered to Paul. In the long run, as it were, God values both slave and master equally. But the modern liberal message is that the here and now also matters. Nowhere does the Apostle reflect on literal slavery, except when he says, repeatedly, that we are all, slaves and masters, one in Christ.

Yet that is the point. People didn’t object to the system of secular slavery, right up to the liberal abolition movements of the late 18th and especially the early 19th century. The Pope in 1537 deemed native Americans to have human souls, and therefore, when converted to Christianity, were not to be directly enslaved; yet Africans were another matter. It is not true that Christians early or late were opposed slavery as a system (which is one among many reasons it does not make sense to attribute liberalism itself to Western Christianity).

A slave did not have the moral luck to be virtuous. He was coerced to good, at any rate ‘good’ in the eyes of his master. (Thomas Carlyle in 1849 called economics the “dismal science” because his friend John Stuart Mill, among other liberals, dared to oppose slavery—which, like

medieval serfdom, Carlyle reckoned was a good, un-dismal discipline for the numerous people slavish by nature; Persky 1990) But in an age of non-slavery in political and economic ideology, and the resulting gigantic positive sum in the economy, it is not obvious from Christian theology that a masterful state should be enforcing the virtues. It should not at least if a liberated will—a choice between virtues and vices—is to be meaningful, which God so evidently wishes.

One can be a slave in a metaphorical sense to lust, say, or to other disordered passions (among which natural-law theologians have often placed homosexuality). But, among the numerous sub-definitions and quotations in the three pages of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* concerning *liber* and its derivatives, none so much as hints at such an ethical as against political/social notion. The word is about literal slavery to another human, as one might expect from pagan Romans with many slaves. Yet the *OED* does give as the earliest use of the French-origin ‘liberty’ in Middle English the theological definition, namely, “Freedom from the bondage ... of sin,” quoting Wycliffe’s bible of c1384, 2 Corinthians 3:17 (verse 18 in Wycliffe’s numbering): “Forsoth where is the spirit of God, there is liberte.” The *OED*’s last quotation on this score, as recently as 2007 from the theologian Glenn Tinder, speaks plainly that “an inner liberty—from sin ...—renders outer liberty a secondary, or even unimportant, consideration.” Well, not for an 18th-century liberal.

By 1776 among advanced intellectuals in northwestern Europe (fluent, needless to say, in classical Latin, and often hostile to and ignorant of Medieval Latin or of the substance of medieval theology), such a liberalism had become fashionable, as for example in the novel and highly non-classical opposition to literal, chattel slavery. Consider, as the most well-known example, the declaration by the conflicted Virginia slave-owner and deist, based on John Locke’s formulation in the 1690s, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

3. Liberalism came with a new ethic

That year 1776 saw also the publication of Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Smith was a permission-egalitarian, opposed to slavery and to ‘protection’ in commerce, which are respectively the private and the public subjugation of one human to another, backed by the state’s coercion. To call Smith, and his liberalism, ‘egalitarian’ is mildly controversial, but not mistaken. True, Smith’s two books—the other, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976a [1759]), is the one he loved the most—are rich and subtle enough, and very occasionally (it must be conceded) confused enough, that his words can be marshalled for the political left as much as for liberalism (though never for the political right). They have been so marshalled recently, for example, by the brilliant Smith scholar, the philosopher Samuel

Fleischacker (2014). But other brilliant Smith scholars, in particular Sandra Peart and David Levy (2008, for example 84-5), attribute to him a modest “analytical egalitarianism” so characteristic of 18th-century social thought in Scotland. The analyst and the human subject are to be seen as equal, contrary to masterful French schemes of top-down. “It is the highest impertinence and presumption ... in kings and ministers,” Smith wrote, “to pretend to watch over the economy of private people” (1976b [1776], II.iii.36, 346). And the private people are to be equal in permissions.

Smith advocated in all his writings “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty” (1976b, IV.ix.51, 687). In Smith, the word ‘natural’ and his much less frequent locution (three times only in all his surviving writings) “the invisible hand” are stand-ins for “the Christian doctrine of divine providential care for humanity,” as the economist and theologian Paul Oslington (2012) has argued. In line with British natural theology of the Newtonian sort, a theology in which Smith was immersed (whatever his personal faith, about which we have to speculate), God’s “other book,” of nature, reveals the truths of the heavens, and of humanity, too. Like his children, the other so-called “classical” economists down to Marx and Mill, Smith had no real conception of what an obvious and simple system of natural liberty would in fact yield in the two centuries after his death. But he did sketch a reason it would yield a continual approach to equality of genuine comfort, as Oslington also argues.

If God-given, in view of the Christian equality of souls, Smith was recommending a society which was, at any rate by the standard of his age, radically egalitarian—in permission, I repeat, not in initial or end-state material capabilities expressed in money. Smith was particularly indignant about restrictions on a worker’s right to use his labor as he saw fit. The English (not Scottish) Settlement and Removal Acts, which attempted to prevent poor people from overwhelming local systems of poor relief, would force the poor back to the parishes of their birth—literally removing and resettling them, a cleansing by social class. There is doubt whether it actually happened on a large scale. But never mind: Smith’s indignation at the trespass on a poor man’s liberty was aroused.

To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanor from the parish where he chooses to reside is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice. ... There is scarce a poor man in England of forty years of age, I will venture to say, who has not in some part of his life felt himself most cruelly oppressed by this ill-contrived law (1976b, IV.v.55).

He is not requiring that the laborer be paid the same as the landlord, merely that an executive committee of the landed classes does not deny him permission to live and work where he wishes, “at liberty.” It is Smith’s “liberal plan of [social] equality, [economic] liberty, and [legal] justice” (1976b, IV.9, 664 and 687).

In the line of Smith's predecessors Locke and Voltaire, he at length acquired political allies for such novel opinions, though it took some decades after 1790 to bring liberal policies to ascendancy in Europe. Liberalism's hour, that is, came recently. It is not anciently implied by the European character, Yet the timing of liberalism's coming is not an entire mystery. From 1517 to 1789, the north and especially the northwest of Europe and its offshoots witnessed, *Dei gratia*, successful reformations and revolts and revolutions, which could easily have gone in an unsuccessful and illiberal direction. Two among many such happy turning points for a nascent liberalism a-borning were the Spanish army's failure at the Siege of Alkmaar in 1573, and then in 1588 the failure of another portion of the best army in Europe to land in England. At length, around the North Sea a liberalism against hierarchy was (always partially) victorious (McCloskey 2016).

Until liberalism came to Europe the equal immortal souls of Christianity were to take up in this life, uncomplainingly, their highly unequal crosses, and not to whine about hierarchies of permissions enforced by guild or *Graf* or government. The pre-liberal theory was, as the Swedish-American radical Joe Hill (1911) expressed with anti-clerical sarcasm, "Work and pray, live on hay. / You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

Liberalism is sometimes construed by its enemies, and sometimes even by its less-wise friends, as an amoral Prudence Only, Greed is Good, a social Darwinism of egoism in the style of Ayn Rand. It need not be so. Think of John Stuart Mill or Ramon Aron. Ethical constraints are surely needed against Greed is Good. I myself wrote a book in 2006 on the constraints on sheer selfish will, if such a will is seen as "maximize profit regardless" or some other economic fantasy encouraging sin. Prudence is a virtue, but it is decidedly not the only virtue relevant to a liberal society—again contrary to the less-wise opinions of my economist colleagues. Greed is a great sin, and is to be resisted, I affirmed in 2006, by the constraints of other virtues in attendance on buying and selling, and non-slavery: temperance, justice, courage, faith, hope and love.

One may ask who fashions such constraints on greed. Most of them are ethical habits learned at one's mother's knee, if one pays attention—and then they are molded by churches, communities, friends, novels, movies. The notion expressed by communitarians of the left such as Michael Sandel or of the right such as Patrick Deneen that liberalism must leave community to one side is mistaken.⁸ And even in the *agora* (which is a commune, too, argued the Dutch economist Arjo Klamer, 2017) the ethical schooling is not derisory, being what the liberals among the French in the 18th century called *doux commerce*. Contrary to an illiberal rhetoric elevating the state with its coercions as an ethical model, a life in private business is nothing like automatically corrupting.

⁸ For the case against them, McCloskey (2012 ad 2018).

In a collection of mini-essays asking, “Does the free market corrode moral character?” the political philosopher Michael Walzer replied, “Of course it does.” But then he wisely added that *any* social system can corrode one or another virtue. That the Bourgeois Era has tempted people into thinking that greed is good, wrote Walzer (2008), “isn’t itself an argument against the free market. Think about the ways democratic politics also corrodes moral character. Competition for political power puts people under great pressure ... to shout lies at public meeting, to make promises they can’t keep.” Fallen humans are to be expected to be like that. Or think about the ways even a mild socialism puts people under great pressure to commit the sins of state-enforced envy or class hatred—or in the non-mild case the environmental crimes such as draining the Aral Sea. Or think about the ways, before the progressive historian Charles C. Sellers’ alleged ‘commercial revolution’ in the early United States (which he claimed damaged an alleged “affective and altruistic relations of social reproduction in traditional societies”) put people under great pressure to obey their husbands in all things and to hang troublesome Quakers and Anabaptists (Sellers 1996).

That is to say, any social system, if it is not to dissolve into a Hobbesian war of all against all, needs ethics adopted by its participants. It must have some device—taboos, preaching, coyote tales, songs, movies, the press, child raising, or in a pinch the state (as in a Prohibition of alcohol advocated by the New Liberals)—to slow down the corrosion of moral character, to maintain what standard the society adopts, good or bad. The Bourgeois Era has in many ways set a higher ethical standard than others—abolishing slavery and giving votes to women and the poor; taking profit from its astounding innovations, yes, but a profit soon competed away by others rushing forward, and yielding therefore gigantic progress for the wretched of the earth. One can put a number on it, as the Nobel economist William Nordhaus (2004) did. He calculated that since World War II only 2 percent of the social gain in the U.S. from innovations such as bar codes (this Walmart and Amazon) or the computer (Gates and Jobs) or containerization (Malcom McLean) has stayed with the innovators. The 2 percent made them, to be sure, immensely rich, but it left the 98 percent of gain from cheaper retail or better computers or more goods shipped from China to the rest of us.

For further progress, Walzer, who is another communitarian, puts his trust in an old conservative trope of ethical education arising from well-intentioned laws enforced by the police. One might doubt that a state strong enough to enforce such laws would remain uncorrupted for long. Power tends to corrupt. Look at the results of Prohibition and the War on Drugs. The state is regularly a poor instructor in ethics. People speak of the state’s courts as the ‘ultimate’ or ‘foundational’ protection, but such metaphors slip in a factual supposition that is false. Most protections against force and fraud, such as locks on doors and prudence in the agora and cooperatively enforced practices in businesses—and religious exclusion, if it’s a diamond

merchant in Brooklyn who cheats his orthodox Jewish colleagues—are not in fact provided by the state. They do not appeal to a gentile court.

4. It is consistent with Christianity, and socialism often is not

Such a liberal economy, I claim, is consistent with a Christian life, employing a liberated will constrained by ethical treatment of others and oneself and God.

True, the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart (2017) notes in the postscript to his recent translation of the New Testament that the Christian testament has numerous passages in which God's word interpreted by humans demands, literally or in effect, that the rich give away their goods and follow Jesus. The Christian gospels and many a Christian theologian early and late attack accumulated wealth, surprisingly harshly by the standards of the rest of the world's religious canon. In *A Passage to England* (1959), the Indian professor of English Nirad C. Chaudhuri noted the contrast between the Lord's Prayer requesting one's daily bread and the Hindu prayer to Durga, the Mother Goddess, "Give me wealth, long life, sons, and all things desirable" (Chaudhuri 1959, 178; cf. ch. V 'Money and the Englishman'). One prays as a Hindu to the elephant-headed god Ganesh for overcoming obstacles at the outset of a project, to obtain longevity, desired powers and prosperity. The Vedic hymns are filled with passages like this one in a hymn to Agni the god of fire: "I pray to Agni ... who ... brings most treasure. ... Through Agni one may win wealth, and growth from day to day, glorious and most abounding in heroic sons" (Knott 1998, 15). It makes the Prosperity Gospel in its promises look stingy.

Thus, too, in Zoroastrianism a prayer of blessing (Afrinagan Dahman) reads, "May these blessings of the Asha-sanctified come into this house, namely, rewards, compensation, and hospitality; and may there now come to this community Asha, possessions, prosperity, good fortune, and easeful life."⁹ Like all the faiths of the Axial Age, Zoroastrianism recommends charity to the poor. But it does not condemn fortunes honestly made and devoutly spent (which may have something to do with the unusual recent prosperity under 'capitalism' of the tiny group of Zoroastrian Parsis in Pakistan, northwest India, and England). Likewise, Jewish herders and traders viewed herding and trading as ethically acceptable. The Israeli economist Meir Tamari argues that there are few anti-commercial traditions in Judaism. In the 13th century Rabbenu Bachya, like Aquinas and certain other Christian theorists at the time, as town life revived, declared that "active participation of man in the creation of his own wealth is a sign of spiritual greatness. In this respect we are, as it were, imitators of God" (quoted in Sacks 2002, 87). *Imago Dei*. Nor is it surprising that the religion sprung from a merchant of Mecca "protects and endorses

⁹ Afrinagan Dahman, at <http://www.avesta.org/avesta.html> (accessed December 10, 2020).

the personal right to own what one may freely gain, through legitimate means, such as gifts and the fruits of one's hand or intellect. It is a sacred right."¹⁰

What is surprising is that a Christendom so unusually hostile to commerce, profit, trade, wealth and gain would in the 19th century commence admiring the bourgeois versions of the seven principle virtues and encouraging, out of liberalism, a universally enriching 'innovism' (a word for the modern system much to be preferred, I repeat, to the deeply misleading word 'capitalism'). Yet what is *not* surprising in view of the ancient hostility of Christianity to the accumulation of wealth is that also, and immediately, a bourgeois but still seriously Christian Europe in the 19th century invented the ideal of socialism, at first in an explicitly Christian form. True, Marx and Engels (1988 [1848], 77) sneered at it: "Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property? Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat." Yet most non-Marxists of the left down to the present retain an economic faith tintured by Christian socialism.

Socialism, too, contains its program in its very word, from Latin *socius*, 'ally,' and as an adjective, 'sharing.' The closest allies in a traditional society are of course members of one's family. We are to have a family (of 330 million souls, say) making decisions socially, not individually, at any rate in matters of Mammon. Erasmus in the 1508 and later editions of his collection of Latin tags (Erasmus 2001) always placed as the first item *amicorum communia omnia*: among friends all [is held] in common. What made such a lovely (if approximate) truth in a family or in a small group of friends into a social theory was its rigorous application increasingly after 1848 to societies of 330 million strangers, or even of 6 million, such as Sweden in 1927. A famous speech then to the Swedish parliament introduced the term *folkhemmet*, the people's home. It was inspired by an alliance characteristic of the era, of conservative corporatists and progressive socialists (thus the New Deal in the United States), consecrated by the holy waters of Christian socialism or the social gospel or Catholic social teaching. It emphasized not Marx's class struggle but, in a liberal echo, a sweet society of (often formerly) Christian friends, such as advocated by the American theologian Walter Rauschenbusch's grandson, the philosopher Richard Rorty. In the United States, the co-founder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, the French peasant and priest Peter Maurin, used to wander the streets declaring, "The world would be better off/ if people tried to become better./ And people would become better/ if they stopped trying to be better off" (Ellsberg 1983, xxv). Do good by doing poorly.

I am giving the word 'socialism,' note, a baggy definition, ranging from housing regulations up to communism-with-gulags. A housing regulation, even if mild and reasonable, is

¹⁰ Both of these are mottoes to Chapter 2 in Novak (1996, 41).

of course necessarily backed by physical coercion, however seldom in ordinary circumstances the coercion is applied. Otherwise the intended regulation by society is a dead letter. Public coercion, not private agreement, is the method. If you violate the building code, you will be fined. If you don't pay the fine, you will be jailed. If you try to escape, you will be shot.

The intent in the baggy definition is not to tar social democrats with Stalinism, or with the new Maoism of Xi Jinping. It is to persuade the social democrats to stop supposing that there exists an easily attained third position between coercion and persuasion, between state action and non-coerced inter-action. There is a bright line, as English Puritans c. 1642 could affirm, between being physically coerced to attend Anglican services by state action, on the one hand, and being amiably persuaded to do so, on the other.

Let us stipulate for the sake of argument that social democracy is stable, and does not devolve into East-German tyranny and a rule by the *Stasi*. That is, we stipulate that mere housing regulations, say, do not lead inevitably to a larger and larger state, on the road to serfdom (thus against Hayek 1944). (On the other hand, it is only prudent to worry about such a devolution, as some social democrats do not worry enough, supposing the state to be a sweet bunch of wise folk.) Yet the true liberals since Voltaire and Smith and Wollstonecraft have recommended a restrained state, and the wide practice of persuasion in voluntary exchange. Thus in 1776 Paine, who was a free trader, declared that “government even in its best state is but a necessary evil, in its worst state an intolerable one” (Paine 1776, 6). In 1849, the American naturalist and essayist Henry David Thoreau (1849, 1), who in aid of innovism had improved the machinery in his father's pencil manufactory, agreed: “I heartily accept the motto, ‘That government is best which governs least’; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically.” Modern social democrats and United States “High Liberals” attack such notions, and yearn for *folkhemmet*.

Hostility to an imagined ‘capitalism,’ and enthusiasm for some version of socialism, became in the early 20th century a commonplace among intellectual Christians. “By the late 19th century,” notes the historian Jürgen Kocka, “capitalism was no longer thought to be a carrier of progress.”¹¹ The case against ‘capitalism’ was summarized in 1910 by the Reverend H. H. Williams of Oxford, writing on “Ethics” in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*: “The failure of ‘laissez-faire’ individualism in politics to produce that common prosperity and happiness which its advocates hoped for caused men to question the egoistic basis upon which its ethical counterpart was constructed” (Williams 1910).

Even in 1910 the Reverend Williams was mistaken factually, and as the 20th century proceeded the facts became less and less supportive of the anti-innovism view. As early even as 1910 a commercially tested betterment and the creativity of steam and steel had yielded

¹¹ Personal communication, November 2014.

unprecedentedly common prosperity and happiness, at any rate by historical standards. The prosperity of British working people had doubled since 1848, and at least had not fallen in the face of rapid British population growth in the half century before 1848. Then in the century after 1910 it redoubled and redoubled again and yet again redoubled, for a factor since 1848 of sixteen at least, even in a United Kingdom that in 1800 vied with the Netherlands as the richest country per person in the world.

Yet in 1800 even the average person in the United Kingdom was miserable by today's standard, dragging along on \$6 a day in present-day prices. Then liberalism and its encouragements to innovism—the permission to, as the British say, “have a go”—brought a Great Enrichment, to \$100 a day by now, a factor of about 17. If the higher quality of goods (food, housing, education) is taken into account, the Great Enrichment is more like a factor of 30 or 40. That is, it was in total not the 100 percent or 200 percent since the year 1800 that people will reply if you ask them. It was a startling 3,000 or 4,000 percentage enrichment of the poor, coming from the commercially tested betterments of kerosene and electricity, cardboard and container ships, subways and autos, movies and universities, airplanes and the internet. Startling though such thousands of percentages are, no competent student of economics, economic history or public health would disagree (Rosling et al. 2018; McCloskey 2010; 2016 for details and evidence). The poor are not always with us, not since political liberalism and economic innovism out of liberalism took hold.

5. Liberal ‘innovism’ is not zero sum, but socialism is

Yet the intellectuals had in Reverend Williams' time, as George Bernard Shaw noted in 1912, long since turned against economic innovism arising from political liberalism. The priests and artists and journalists and professors looked back in conservative-socialist fashion to the lovely Christian commonwealth of the Middle Ages: “The first half [of the nineteenth century] despised and pitied the Middle Ages,” wrote Shaw (1990 [1912]). “The second half saw no hope for mankind except in the recovery of the faith, the art, the humanity of the Middle Ages. ... For that was how men felt, and how some of them spoke, in the early days of the Great Conversion, which produced, first, such books as the *Latter Day Pamphlets* of Carlyle, Dickens' *Hard Times*, ... and later on the Socialist movement.”

By 1919, Tillich and Wegener were claiming, recall, that innovism is a matter of non-cooperation. They were mistaken. An economy is a massive device for cooperation. The competition so offensive to them is merely the permission to enter a trade badly served by the present powers, an entry that then radically improves the lot of the poor. Yet, as the professional economist and amateur theologian Robert Nelson (2001, 331) commented on such sentiments,

“If the private pursuit of self-interest was long seen in Christianity as a sign of the continuing presence of sin in the world—a reminder of the fallen condition of humanity since the transgression of Adam and Eve in the garden—a blessing for a market economy has appeared to many people as the religious equivalent of approving of sin.”

The economy in this view is a zero-sum game, a species of football. One might claim correctly, acknowledging a sad and sober fact, that before 1800 or so the economy *was* zero sum, one person’s advantage conditioned by the sinful ruin of the other (see Wright 2019). The fact justifies the claim implicit in some passages in the Hebrew Bible (though contradicted in others) and explicit in the New Testament that a rich man cannot with ease, or enjoying his ease, enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Such a view, though commonplace in the 20th century among Christian people, is factually mistaken. Since 1800 or so, the zero-sum claim has been spectacularly belied. Income per head of the poorest has increased in Brazil and Japan and Finland and now China and soon India by that 3,000 percent, dwarfing any gain to the poor to be had by redistribution in a zero-sum economy. It is as though the old football game yielding typical scores of 28 to 7 in favor of the rich came after a while to yield in the new game scores of 840 to 210. The rich still ‘won,’ if sports-talk or a socialism of envy is how one wishes to think. But the formerly poor now enjoyed fully human lives, denied in the days of their old score of 7.

And conceptually speaking, innovism is the opposite of the sinful “deliberate egoism” that the young pastors of Germany claimed. It achieves the solidarity of all people through voluntary exchanges among the 6 or 300 or for that matter 7,800 million souls rather than through the coerced allocation as though in *folkhemmet*. The people’s home is run by lordly parents, or by lordly economists, or by lordly commissars with, it may be, their own motives distinct from those of the citizen-children inside. Liberalism by contrast is the adult system of thoroughgoing cooperation with strangers. The Good Samaritan’s one-on-one gift was glorious. Yet all the more is the one-on-many, or many-on-one, of modern innovism evoked by profit and craft and property. After all, no profit is achieved, and any craft is pointless, and any property fruitless, unless the seller’s product made out of them is advantageous to the others, in the opinion of the others—who then willingly give over some of the profit from their own selling of labor or craft or property. It is liberal innovism, mutual gain, a positive sum.

The Christian clerisy since the Great Conversion has not much listened to such liberal reflections. Yet physical coercion by one human over another is an evil in Christian theology, too, being an offense against the liberated will granted by a loving God. Socialism (technicalities and intentionalities aside) is the making of economic decisions by the general will, Rousseau’s *volonté générale*, enforced (note the word) by physical coercion. Rousseau (2001 [1762], IV.4) believed that the phrase *volonté générale* resolved the obvious tension between individual action and state coercion. If you voluntarily join in the general will, he asked, what’s the problem? And, happily,

you will so join, as the nature of man under socialism evolves away from a wickedly bourgeois nature, “an economy,” said the pastors, “in which each is the enemy of the other.” Rousseau’s oxymoronic notion of a voluntary coercion survives in political theory as the notion of a social contract.

The only alternatives to such socialized decision-making are the decisions made by the God-given individual wills interacting with other humans without physical coercion, as in the evolution of language or music or science. The result need not be a harsh and unchristian social Darwinism, a country-club disdain for the poor. Liberalism gives to others in an ethical manner the dignity of respect, autonomy, self-rule, liberty of the will—but within serious ethics. Most human arrangements are of this character, and especially so outside of tyrannies: language is, for example; and art; science, love, sports and manners, as well.

Admittedly, Rousseau’s notion is paralleled in theology to voluntarily acceding to God’s inevitable law. And admittedly the economy, the language, love, football, and art, science, and manners, make use of customary agreements to arrive at this or that action—what the liberal economist James Buchanan (1987) called “constitutional political economy,” and what linguists and linguistic philosophers call “conversational implicatures” (Grice 1989). Yet since Rousseau the implicit agreement with the general will has of course been used routinely to justify evil coercions. In the USSR, for example, someone who did not agree with the general will as discerned by the state was judged to be quite mad, and would be put under the coercing care of psychiatrists.

The state, as Max Weber (1994 [1919], 310) put it, can with justice claim “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical constraint/force/violence/coercion” (*das Monopol legitimen physischen Zwanges*). Good. Such a monopoly is greatly to be preferred to oligopolies of multiple gangs prowling around to physically coerce people. The liberal recommendation is to have a single guardian, and then watch over him. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?* Who guards the very guardians? Who watches the Chicago police? We’d better.

But we must keep in mind, as the riot police gather, that the justified monopoly does necessarily involve physical coercion. After all, they have the guns. Markets by contrast do not involve physical coercion, and Apple and Facebook do not have guns to coerce you into buying their wares. At any rate, they do not coerce unless the word ‘coercion’ is so extended in meaning so that any influence, voluntary or physical, words or actions, advertising or billy clubs, is deemed ‘coercive.’ The dean of the College of the University of Chicago during the student disorders against the Vietnam War, the great rhetorician Wayne Booth, was trying to persuade a student to leave the Administration Building, which had been seized by the students. The student, irritated, said, “Now don’t try to *reason* with me!”¹² Without reason, disagreement, rhetoric, free speech, all

¹² Booth used it as the title of a collection in 1970 of his essays on that turbulent era.

is [defined to be] coercive, nothing is non-coercive, and we are doomed to an absence of will, by definition. Liberty of the will becomes a laughable fairy tale, not God's grace.

6. Intentionality does not imply socialism

The ancient stoics, with many Christian quietists, went to the other extreme, claiming that external slavery allows nonetheless an internal freedom. As the philosophical stoic emperor of Rome and stoic slave from Asia Minor both noted, even a slave has choices, within a more or less constrained position. An old *New Yorker* cartoon shows two prisoners chained hand and foot, hanging from a prison wall. One says to the other, "Here's my plan."

Such extensions of meaning are rife in the philosophical discussion of liberty of the will (Kane 2002). I raise my arm voluntarily rather than not, or accept a poorly paid job in Vietnam making running shoes rather than starving. But, the determinist argues, in a world of causation the will to raise the arm or the will to accept the job has itself causes, back to the big bang and (the theist adds) God's Beyond. One hears such an opinion expressed often on the left nowadays. It implies that being offered a job that is not heavenly, or being presented with an argument that is not pleasant, is an aggression, no better than state coercion in employment or in opinion, as in Stalin's and now Putin's Russia or Mao's and now Xi's China.

Erasmus, in his debate during the 1520s with Luther over liberty of the will, turned the discussion towards the social and ethical consequences of a supposed lack of liberty of the will. Such a liberal trope of argument was characteristic of the Prince of the Humanists. By contrast, the arguments about liberty of the will have mostly taken place at the top level, so to speak, of God's grant of liberty. Erasmus in the debate moves down to the level of human psychology, arguing for a middle position between the dual dangers of 'indifference'/'hopelessness' in predestination or an 'arrogance' in supposing that one can by works alone achieve salvation (Erasmus 2013 [1524], 85). Staying at such a level has the merit that we have actual information and experience about it, and can reflect with some chance of conclusion about ethics and law. Rising to the level of metaphysics yields only paradoxes, irresolvable it would seem short of the Second Coming.

The theology about liberty of the will hangs on the word 'intentional.' Progressive Christians such as Pope Francis' economist, Stefano Zamagni (2010), declare, contrary to the historical evidence and economic logic, that conscious, planned, intentional action at the group level, the *volonté générale*, is what is needed in order to improve the world. Francis himself, a child in Argentina of the Theology of the People, said to reporters on a flight from Poland to Rome, "as long as the world economy has at its center the god of money and not the person ... [it] is fundamental terrorism, against all humanity" (*The Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2016). But

no businessperson makes money without pleasing the person, saving her from starvation, educating her children, giving her a fuller life in which she can praise God. Contrary to such an obvious link between ‘money’ and the person, say Zamagni, and Francis, the society cannot rely on any of those ‘neo-liberal’ invisible hands or spontaneous orders of the sort that determine, say, the evolution of the Italian language or of Milanese fashion. Thus my own Episcopal priest in the United States declared in her sermon of July 4 that “independence is not a Christian value,” and that what is Christian is a dependence on God and community (God’s Will, but then also the General Will in central planning of innovation, say).

A Christian liberal disagrees on the matter with Zamagni and with Pope Francis and with my beloved pastor, as with many other good-hearted folk. The initial independence of the person in a liberal economy results in the great and good interdependence of modern life. You don’t grow your own wheat or make your own accordion. You trade for them with people many thousands of miles away. Liberalism celebrates a non-coercive and ethical *interdependence*.

Catholic social teaching of the sort Zamagni advocates doesn’t face up to the point. One-to-one cooperation is splendid, and certainly subject to ‘intentionality.’ You can choose in a liberal society the life of a desert hermit if you feel so inclined, and then eschew the profit of social relations in an economy. But most people are not so inclined. If so, they should reject “national self-sufficiency” as vigorously as they would reject a law preventing them from buying a baguette at Bouton’s boulangerie rather than Bateau’s. The primitive calls for national self-sufficiency in response to the covid-19 pandemic deny the massive gain from one-on-many trade. If applied consistently, the protectionists would call for cutting off trade with your neighbor down the street. Grow your own wheat; make your own accordion. To the contrary, listen again to Smith (1976b, Li.11, 22-3): “The woolen-coat, for example... is the produce of the joint labor of a great multitude of workmen” [and workwomen, please, dear Adam]. The shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool-comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production.”

The American theologian and writer Frederick Buechner (2009, 119) set down as an axiom that “We have freedom to the degree that the master whom we obey grants it to us in return for our obedience. We do well to choose a master in terms of how much freedom we get for how much obedience.”¹³ His economic talk of a tradeoff is commendable, and the theological point is, too—that one can for instance be enslaved to corrupting desires, and that a loving Lord is a better choice of master than Satan. But the concession to non-liberty has illiberal dangers. St. Paul drove the axiom of universal lordship, typical of the slave society in which he lived, to its secular

¹³ I’m grateful to Amity Carrubba for the reference.

conclusion: “Let every one be subordinate to higher authorities. For there is no authority except under God” (Romans 13:1). “Render unto Caesar” was perhaps a necessary rhetorical tactic at the time for a Judean with suspect politics. But the British King James I or the French King Louis XIV could not have put better the case for a merger of religious and secular tyranny.

In short, a secular, human lordship, an absence of liberty, is not inevitable, as we moderns have believed since 1776. And human lordship is not at all—*pace* St. Paul—an entailment of God’s Lordship. Even theology shows, that is, how very illiberal St. Paul’s, St. Augustine’s, Calvin’s, and James I’s metaphysics is, how much against the discovery in the 18th century of the merits of human wills constrained by ethics but liberated from human coercion.

7. Charity is not socialism

We are God’s creatures. God therefore owns us, by an analogy with Lockean mixing of labor with unappropriated land, or by an analogy with the ownership of children by parents. But God chooses to liberate us, not leave us as slaves. A parent, and God, wants us to be liberated adults, not perpetual children. We Jews and Christians say at Passover/Easter that God brought us out of slavery in Egypt, and then (we Christians add) by Christ’s sacrifice out of death. We Jews or Moslems say that a child undergoes a *bar/bat mitzvah* or instruction in the Holy Koran to become an adult, a *mukallaf*—in modern English, a ‘responsible’ person (see Haskell 1999 on the extraordinarily recent history of ‘responsibility’).

As the theologian and Biblical scholar Shawna Atteberry (2019) puts it, the people-as-pets theory of our relation to God and His universe inspires “one of the greatest modern heresies of the church: the Prosperity Gospel ... [which] says that if we are truly in God’s will we’ll get everything we want: wealth, health, and all the toys that money can buy.” To the contrary, she observes, God and the universe sometimes say “No.” It is a position natural to the world of the economist, though God’s grace be free. If we lived in Eden, it would not be so. But, as liberated adults in a real world governed by natural and social laws, we choose, as Eve chose—and as in the tale as Adam too chose, exercising the sadly persuadable will of a liberated man.

The über-liberal ‘Austrian’ economics speaks of liberty of the will as ‘human action.’ Orthodox, non-liberal public theology, by contrast, wants the state and God to treat us like obedient pets or children or slaves, not liberated wills. And orthodox, non-Austrian economics nowadays views people as reactive, maximizing utility under a constraint, like grass seeking the light and the water optimally. No, replies the liberal Christian. God made us in the *imago Dei/Deae*. Liberated.

The point is that there *is* a third way between a coercive state and an atomistic individual: namely, the cooperation yielded by entry and exit in markets. When Jesus’s fishermen sold their

catch—the abundant one arranged for them that day by Jesus himself—they intended only to help their own families. But by the miracle of interdependence in the market for fish, thousands ate. The unintended consequence of specialization and trade is a social miracle analogous to the divine miracle of loaves and fishes.

The great economist Frank Knight (1885–1972), in an anti-clerical fury, mistook the Christian morality of charity as a call to common ownership in a big society and not merely in a literal home. He attacked it as unworkable. (It is said that the only time the University of Chicago has actually refunded tuition money to a student was to a Jesuit who took Knight’s course on ‘the history of economic thought’ and discovered that it was in fact a sustained and not especially well-informed assault on the Catholic Church.) Knight wrote a book in 1945 with T. W. Merriam called *The Economic Order and Religion*, which mysteriously asserts that Christian love destroys “the material and social basis of life,” and is “fantastically impossible,” and is “incompatible with the requirements of everyday life,” and entails an “ideal ... [which is] not merely opposed to civilization and progress but is an impossible one.” Under Christian love “continuing social life is patently impossible” and “a high civilization could hardly be maintained long, ... to say nothing of progress.” (Knight and Merriam 1945, 29, 30, 31, 46).

It happens that Knight and Merriam are arguing that social life in a large group *with thoroughgoing ownership in common* is impossible. *That* is what they believe Christian love entails (see, for example, Knight and Merriam 1945, 48). Compare Tillich and Wegener. The source for Knight and Merriam is always the Gospels, never the elaborate compromises with economic reality of the Church of Power, or of other Christian writings, such as the 38th article of the Anglicans: “The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.”

But, yes: social life without private property *is* impossible, at any rate in large groups. So said Pope Leo XIII in 1891 in *Rerum Novarum*, re-echoed by Pius XI in 1931, John XXIII in 1961 and 1963, by Paul VI in 1967 and 1971, and by John Paul II in 1981 and 1991.¹⁴ These men were not 19th-century liberals—especially, as the Catholic but liberal public intellectual Michael Novak (1989) explained, not ‘liberals’ in the harshest Continental sense. The popes admitted private property—when used with regard to soul and community. They were nothing like the Sermon-on-the-Mount socialists that Knight and Merriam attacked.

¹⁴ These are Pius: *Quadragesimo Anno*; John: *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*; Paul: *Populorum Progressio* and *Octogesima adveniens*; and John Paul: *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus*. Michael Novak (1989 [1984], h. 6-8) is my guide here.

Thus Leo: “private possessions are clearly in accord with nature” (15), following his hero, Aquinas.¹⁵ “The law of nature, ... by the practice of all ages, has consecrated private possession as something best adapted to man’s nature and to peaceful and tranquil living together” (17). “The fundamental principle of Socialism which would make all possessions public property is to be utterly rejected because it injures the very ones whom it seeks to help” (23). “The right of private property must be regarded as sacred” (65). “If incentives to ingenuity and skill in individual persons were to be abolished, the very fountains of wealth would necessarily dry up; and the equality conjured up by the Socialist imagination would, in reality, be nothing but uniform wretchedness and meanness for one and all, without distinction” (22).

“The love-gospel,” write Knight and Merriam (1945, 50), “condemning all self-assertion as sin ... would destroy all values.” Knight and Merriam are correct if they mean, as they appear to, that Love *without other and balancing virtues* is a sin. Knight’s understanding of Christianity appears to have derived from his childhood experience in a primitive Protestant sect, the Campbellites (evolved now into the less primitive Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ), and theirs is what he took to be the core teaching of Christianity: “No creed but the Bible. No ethic but love.”

But Love without Prudence, Justice, Temperance and their combinations is not Christian orthodoxy—for example, the orthodoxy of Aquinas or of Leo XIII. And, yes, such a single-virtue ethic would *not* be ethical in a fallen world. Economists would call the actual orthodoxy a ‘second-best’ argument, as against the first best of “to him who washes to bring judgment against you, so he may take away your tunic, give him your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:40). Given that people are imperfect, the Christian, or indeed any economist, would say: we need to make allowances, and hire lawyers, and call the police. Otherwise everyone will live by stealing each other’s tunics and cloaks, with a resulting failure to produce tunics and cloaks in the first place—and the life of humans will be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

St. Paul himself said so, admittedly in a letter that not all scholars regard as authentic: “And we [that is, Paul, recalling his visit to the Thessalonian Christians] ate bread not as a gift from anyone, but rather by labor and struggle, working night and day so as not to place a burden on any of you ... If anyone should not wish to work, neither let him eat. For we hear of some who walk in idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:8, 10-11; startlingly, Lenin adopted it as a motto). Or to put it more positively, as Michael Novak (1984, xvi) did, “one must think clearly about what actually does work—in a sinful world—to achieve the liberation of peoples and persons.” “In the right of

¹⁵ Leo XIII (1891), paragraph numbers given. See Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (c. 1270), IIa IIae, q. 66, quoted and discussed in Fleischacker (2004, 35 and n40).

property,” wrote even John XXIII in 1961, “the exercise of liberty finds both a safeguard and a stimulus.”¹⁶ Frank Knight couldn’t have put it better.

Charity is not socialism. Generosity is not a system at all. It is of a person, then two, then a few. God arranges such encounters, a Christian might say. But humans value them, too, the gift-economy of grace above material concerns (given an exceptionally eloquent expression in Klemm 2004). Yet to make them into a coerced-contributory social system is to undermine their virtue. We are mostly not friends, but strangers, and even in the Society of Friends the property was not held in common. Knight and Merriam were not really facing Christian orthodoxy and Christian ethics. They were misunderstanding them. One owes love to a family first. Property, with the virtue of justice, protects the beloved family, an analogy of God’s love for us. If any would not work, neither should he eat. Work, depending on temperance and prudence, is desirable to create and to acquire the property. So is prudent stewardship in managing it, though the lilies of the field toil not. For big groups of humans, being neither lilies nor little families, the right prescription is admiring the bourgeois virtues. A Bourgeois Revaluation giving permission to people to ‘have a go’ has since 1800 occurred in Holland, England, Scotland, France, Germany, the U.S., Sweden, Japan, Hong Kong, Ireland, China, India, and has ended, or is ending, famine and other miseries.

So much, then, for a sketch of the political economy of liberty possible in Christian theology. It suggests a new and truly liberal public theology. For it is liberalism, a fulfillment of the Abrahamic equality of souls, that brings human flourishing and human virtue, as God wishes.

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¹⁶ From the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, quoted in Novak (1984, xxii).

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