

# FIRST THINGS

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## IS LIBERALISM A HERESY?

WHY LIBERALISM AND A MARKET ECONOMY ARE BASED ON CHRISTIANITY

by  
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June 2016

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**T**he only viable vehicle of conservatism in modernity is a market-oriented liberalism that regards freedom within law as the means to the common good. Some religiously engaged conservative intellectuals cannot accept this. What drives their animus against the only workable form of conservatism in modernity? They cannot accept that this version of conservatism is at all conservative.

But how conservative is it to refuse to act in and through the givens of our historical moment? Is the paradox of liberalism as the way of being conservative too whimsical for conservatives to wrap their bookish noodles around? Could it be rationalist irritability with the irrationality of liberalism? Is the conservative affronted by liberalism's vulgar historical success, like a Ph.D. student who cannot enjoy a popular movie? Is he like the teenager in *Little Miss Sunshine*, who cannot bear the boisterous eccentricity of his family? Does liberalism's cheerful, can-do lack of a rational foundation drive the conservative into dark Nietzschean foreboding? Does he share the Marxist's contempt for the bourgeoisie who are at home in the market economy? Is he too logical to be persuaded that the only human beings who actually and historically exist are individual persons?

The fact remains: For at least two generations now, the most politically effective conservatism in the West has largely been a conservative liberalism. This political success has not been accidental. As a social, political, and economic form of life, liberal modernity does justice to important truths about the human person.

At the origins of modernity lie the market economies of late medieval Europe. A mixture of the rule of law and respect for personal freedom enabled market economies to emerge. People readily took to the roles of buyers and sellers of goods, because buying and selling involves the kind of role-play in which human beings flourish. The market economy involves an exchange of goods in which both parties benefit. The seller trades his goods for what *he* really wants, payment, and the buyer hands over his money for what *he* really wants, the goods. Because they obtain what they desire, both buyer and seller gain more than they give. Appealing as that may be, market exchange has a still greater allure. However well-meaning the administrator, we would exchange an administered life for the tension of auctions, the drama of negotiations, and the stratagems of the salesman that test our self-discipline. Buying and selling became a driving force and expressive feature of modern societies, because the clever play of concealment and exposure through language and gesture it entails fits our social, dramatic natures like a glove.

Modern philosophers reflected upon modern economic practice. Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling took *homo economicus* to be “humanity” as such. They rightly drew the lesson that human beings are made for praxis, for action, and for dramatic role-playing. But these bookish philosophers were not men of action themselves. In their recoil from the sheer inscrutability of the free play of market exchange, they exaggerated the fact that exchange involves competition for marginal advantage. They mythologized this into a conception of human culture as a life-and-death struggle, and reinterpreted the role-playing in free-market exchange as competition. That hypes up role-play into a battle of wills. According to them, the marketplace trains us to think of life in terms of winners and losers, masters and slaves.

In all of this we find part truth, part Gnostic fantasy. On the one side, our exercise of freedom in the particularity of daily life makes us enigmatic to others. A market society is built around this relative inscrutability. Whether the exchange takes place at the local fish stall or in large-scale transactions of complex financial instruments executed by computers, buyers and sellers play their parts. Each seeks to take advantage of an exchange, wanting as much as possible without scuttling the deal by eliminating any benefit for others. Human nature is expressed in this

serious play of exchange—the brinksmanship of negotiation, the uncertainties of market conditions—which liberal philosophies capture in their emphasis on freedom and its drama.

Yet the marketplace and our roles in it look like a Gnostic melodrama when the play of exchange is inflated into a metaphysical drama rather than a human one. A German idealist like Schelling pictures God-and-humanity as the single “playwright.” The struggle to get the best deal on day-old bread becomes the engine of human history. For Hegel, God storms through history in the guise of struggling and ascendant human desire. Sellers seek to incite desires in buyers.

Seventeenth-century vendors during the tulip mania in Holland asked, How can one do without the exotic tulip bulbs? Buyers seek to satisfy their aroused desires, often for goods they never even knew they wanted. This pattern of desire evoked is the fuel of a market economy. Hegel interprets the open-ended nature of our market desires as a metaphysical desire for divinization. He made the further assumption that we play for keeps, and thus the market game of angling for advantage becomes the struggle for mastery, which is the world’s story.

For two centuries, Christians have quarreled over how to deal with the mixture of imaginative half-truths, philosophical errors, and Gnostic heresies that make up modern philosophy.

Between Vatican I and Vatican II, Catholics tried to sort things out and develop a philosophically cogent and spiritually sound approach to modernity in two different ways.

Fortified by Thomistic encyclicals from Pope Leo XIII, Thomists thought that the way forward required a rejection of liberal philosophies and a revival of the premodern philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. They assembled a litany of errors that they ascribed to liberalism: making man the measure of all things, exalting will over cognition, denying our created nature, and more.

The Thomists soon acquired odd allies such as Charles Maurras, a French Nietzschean and founder of the *Action française*, the mass movement which conned Catholics into thinking being anti-liberal automatically made one conservative. *Action française* opposed the Republican ascendancy in France that had driven the Catholic Church to the margins of public life. Didn’t that make Maurras the logical ally for Catholic royalists? French Thomists such as Jacques

Maritain and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange partnered with *Action française* right down until 1927, when Pius XI at long last ordered French Catholics to break off this *mésalliance*. It's entirely possible to be anti-liberal in a distinctively modern and atheistic way, which is what Fascism was in the early first half of the twentieth century.

The Second World War and Vichy entirely discredited *Action française*. But scholastic anti-liberalism endured. In the 1950s, in his Toulouse Lycée, Pierre Manent was taught by a Maritain-inspired Thomist, Louis Jugnet, who, like Maritain, had been an *Action française* Catholic. Manent put this legacy to work in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, which should be read as a series of "Just-So" stories of the sort beloved by intellectuals. The "idea" or theory of liberalism evolves with logic and clarity: "The *right* replaces the *good*. The intensity of moral approval that the ancients gave to the good, the moderns, following Hobbes, gave to the right, the right of the individual. This is the language and 'value' of liberalism."

**M**anent approaches liberalism in the same way as did the German idealists: Liberalism is a world-creating system. In Manent's analysis, the system is organized around "right" and thus exalts the sovereign individual over the "good." Here he misses a trick picked up by a real gamer like Friedrich Nietzsche. Modern liberal political and economic forms are derivative, not *sui generis*, and certainly not world-creating. The liberal respect for the individual and his rights emerges out of Christianity. The Christian faith that the *person* has an intrinsic, fundamental reality is the religious soil out of which liberal regard for the individual has grown. As David Walsh observes, "Nietzsche was under no illusion about the extent to which the core liberal conception of individual rights was derived from this [to his mind] doomed Christian morality. It was the Christian idea of the soul whose origin and destiny is transcendent that first made it possible for the individual to stand over against society and the world."

Manent complains that liberalism chooses the individual over the good, that the liberal individual is an un-founded end in itself: The liberal, he claims, cannot say what freedom is *for*. This criticism has merit. But the problem is that Western individualism is so deeply rooted in

Christian soil that it is not possible to uproot liberalism without undermining Christianity. The true face of anti-liberalism is a postmodern Nietzsche in which “freedom” amounts to expressive self-assertion. The future of liberal modernity and its emphasis on the socially productive potential of human freedom, including market freedom, is actually tied to Christianity rather than hostile to it.

Maurice Blondel, the French Catholic philosopher who exerted a profound influence on the generation of theologians who played leading roles at Vatican II, recognized this link. His great work *Action* (1893) drew on Spinoza, Schelling, and Fichte. He turned their conception of human-divine co-authorship of history into a metaphysics that was more dramatic than the grand dialectics that characterize German idealism, because the metaphysics pointed toward Christ the Lord. Blondel’s deepest disciple was the Jesuit Henri de Lubac. He agreed with Hegel: Culture is motored by desire. Following Blondel, and breaking with the Thomism of his time, de Lubac rejected as unworkable the effort to evangelize modern culture with the message that the Trinity is not the subject of our deepest natural desire. On the contrary, God is that which human beings in their restless hearts most desire. God, de Lubac said, creates us as human by calling us. We experience that call as a desire for God, a desire only fulfilled by God’s gift of himself. The divine call beckons to and resounds in our free spirits. Much like the barker on the fairgrounds, God awakens within us a desire that, in our fallen condition, we may not even know we have.

Yet de Lubac does not adopt economic self-understanding uncritically. Following Blondel, he interpreted the notion of persons as *exchangers* as meaning that persons are *gifters*. The two thinkers thus maintained the dramatic character of liberal idealism, but instead of seeing exchange as fulfilled in mastery and domination, they saw exchange flourishing most fully in gift. One of de Lubac’s students, Hans Urs von Balthasar, interpreted the economy of salvation, and even the inner life of the Trinity itself, in these dramatic categories.

From 1893, when *Action* was published, until the present day, Thomists have been appalled by Blondel and his followers’ affirmation of liberal modernity. The Thomists think it impractical to

try to turn romanticism against itself. They hold that liberal modernity is intrinsically impoverished because it fails to recognize divine truths beyond the drama set in play by our eccentric, other-relating natural desires. Blondel also thought liberal modernity impoverished, but diagnosed it as stemming from superficiality. Our understanding of desire's quest for fulfillment needs to be deepened, not transcended. Modernity needs to be returned to its Christian roots, not rejected as godless. This seemed an impossible fantasy to Thomists. We cannot engage liberal modernity on friendly terms without absorbing the viruses it carries: pantheism, Gnosticism, and Pelagianism. Blondel was threatened with censure by Thomists. They denounced his purported solipsism, subjectivism, voluntarism, and individualism. Blondel tried to show that human action is, in its deepest sources, oriented toward God; his opponents retaliated by accusing him of immanentism, that is, of identifying God with human processes, and so denying God's sovereign transcendence. To this day, de Lubac and von Balthasar are regarded as pantheists by some of the Thomist school.

Metaphysicians of market economies Kant, Fichte, and Hegel had made human doing and willing the centerpiece of their philosophy. For Thomas Aquinas, theology is primarily a contemplative, theoretical science; for Kant, practical reasoning edges out theory as the path to transcendence. Fichte argued in his *Vocation of Man* that we may not be able to prove anything exists outside our minds, but we darn well have to act in the world, and create a humane world for ourselves. "In the beginning was the deed," said Goethe. Hegel used that thought to enunciate a metaphysics of existential struggle, dramatizing the epic journey of divine-human Spirit as it seeks to know itself in the mirror of its deeds.

Calling his first work *Action*, Blondel drew upon liberal modernity's practical quest for transcendence. He took this dramatic struggle out of the world of academic verbalizing, out of books, and placed it under the cold blue skies of reality and in the fleshly-spiritual struggle of human beings with the Creator God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He meant to show that we are divided against ourselves, that our actions never fully reflect our intentions. There is a superfluity of meaning in our actions that overruns our intentions. Therefore, I can never be

“true to myself,” never achieve integrity or unity between what I aim at and what I actually do. For Blondel, as for Hegel, truth is not so much known as lived. Truth is *achieved*, as it were. It comes about when intention matches action.

**F**or Blondel (and certainly not for Hegel), this achieved truth, this unity of intention and action, comes about only as a gift of the transcendent God. The only way to get past role-playing to an authentic personality is to give ourselves to God so that we can receive our *persona*, our self, back from God. Thus, guided by Blondel’s insights, we can see that the deepest truth of our market economy and its drama of exchange is not *getting* but *giving*. The movement of “making an offer” in the marketplace foreshadows, in a natural way, the supernatural exchange of gifts—my very self to God, and my self in union with him in return.

One prominent Thomist, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, threatened Blondel with a long purgatory if he did not renounce his definition of truth as “the adequation of thought and life” and return to the Thomist definition of truth as the adequation of thought and reality. According to Blondel, we can only turn modern philosophy against itself by following it into real, existential decisions and choices. He could only defeat the bookish “pseudo-existentialism” of German idealism with the real existentialism of Christian witness. Blondel sought to overcome modern philosophical voluntarism from within. He shows us that the human person, as a volitional agent, is an actor whose desires and will are divided. Freedom cannot be at the center of our culture—liberalism’s ambition—unless our desires and will are united, which can only happen against a horizon of faith.

It was no fun living under the threat of ecclesiastical censure for forty years. The crime of writing a brilliant work of Catholic philosophy was unforgivable. But Blondel was a layman, and in modern France, the Thomist clergy had no means of gagging him. Henri de Lubac, a Jesuit under vows of obedience, and one inspired by ardent loyalty to Mother Church, was a soft target. Criticized in all but name in a papal encyclical for his development of Blondel’s theory of human action into a theological claim that the divine image in human beings consists in being driven to

a desire for vision of the Triune God, he was silenced by his superiors. His Thomist critics figured that saying human nature is fulfilled by a divine gift puts God under an obligation to make the gift.

Hans Urs von Balthasar took Blondel's dramatic metaphysics to its theological conclusion. In his theology, the human person comes to be *as person* in the interplay of call and response, by others, and by God. Christ himself is an acting person, one whose identity cannot be known in abstraction from the "scenes" of his historical life. The center of history lies in the two great freedoms, the divine will and the human will, united in the person of Christ. These wills are always in action, serving love's desire to achieve the divine end of consummation, the marriage feast of the Lamb. In Christ, truth is not so much known as lived.

No philosophy or theology has challenged modernity more effectively than that of Blondel, de Lubac, and von Balthasar, and no philosophy or theology has taken as great a risk. They followed through on the deepest intuitions of modernity in order not so much to capture them for Christ as to show that Christ was already present as their fulfillment. These intuitions center on the human person as a dramatic, freedom-loving creature, an agent whose destiny is tied up with his choices.

Blondel's followers believe that this basic insight was vindicated in *Gaudium et Spes* in a passage from paragraph 22 that was often quoted by John Paul II: "Only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear." After the Second Vatican Council, Blondelianism seemed to lose the taint of heresy.

Within a generation, however, liberalism had become unfashionable among Christian theologians once again. By the 1990s, in some theological camps, "liberalism" became a term of abuse. Ironically, among theologians, those most outspoken in their rejection of liberalism today



are themselves descendants of Blondel. Proponents of what is often known as the *Communio* school of theology (named after the journal founded by de Lubac, von Balthasar, and others who followed the Blondelian line) forswore all peace treaties with liberalism. Aiming to recover dogmatic anchors after the depredations of the liberal theologies of 1963 to 1991, between the Beatles' first LP and John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, they named liberalism a heresy. The heirs of Blondel, who had been hunted for heresy for forty years, themselves became heresy hunters. Although they think of themselves as opposed to Thomism for all the reasons de Lubac outlined in the books that got him censured, they end up repeating the Thomistic litany of the intellectual sins of liberalism: voluntarism, individualism, and a Pelagian conception of human freedom.

Like Manent, these theologians—let's call them neo-Blondelians—characterize liberal culture as one in which “free choice” is willy-nilly a good in itself, regardless of the object chosen. This becomes “voluntarism,” the malign motor of modern liberal society.

Voluntarism in its theological form expresses the idea, sometimes attributed to William of Ockham, that the orders binding on nature and morality are not brought about by God's reason but simply by divine fiat. The Ten Commandments are laws because they are divine *commands*. They are God's orders, stemming from his volition (thus voluntarism). The divine will, not divine reason, is the source of our ethical norms, as well as the given forms of the natural world. They are not comprehensible to us on any level. Their “motives” are hidden in the deep inner decrees of God, his inscrutable volitions.

Late medieval and early modern theologians became voluntarists because of their admiration for divine freedom. Voluntarism uses the divine will as a knife to cut the thread of analogy between God and humanity. It follows that we cannot see what makes an ethical command true. We obey it blindly, and the sovereign deity may inflict punishment if we resist his whims. God's freedom rules without impediment, not even the impediment of divine reason.

If human nature, along with other natures, is a creature of the divine will (not reason), then our nature is a creature of volition. We are essentially human not in knowing, but in free agency. As critics see it, to make such a claim about human beings turns us into little deities. Nature is subordinate to our sovereign will. Indeed, only God's will trumps ours, which of course ends up being an empty trump in our secular era. Thus, to say that liberal culture is "voluntaristic" is to say that it values free choice above truth, and in fact detaches free choice from reasons and from truth.

The neo-Blondelians say that in a liberal society we become creators or authors of our destinies, little gods, reinventing Adam, Eve, and Steve, creating new sexual personae for ourselves as we people our own new Edens. Through medical technologies or just through personal fiat, we turn ourselves, others, and nature into malleable material through which free will is satisfied. Human freedom is disconnected from a given world, exalted above God's law and the metaphysical order latent in physical nature. All that matters in a liberal culture, the neo-Blondelians complain, is our freedom to become whatever we will to be. It's the same complaint neo-Thomists made about modernity.

Liberals are voluntarist heretics, this way of thinking concludes, because they value freedom so highly that they cannot see that real freedom always aims at achieving a true good. Real freedom, say the heirs of Blondel who are now anti-liberals, is not just doing anything you want, but choosing rightly and well, choosing what fulfills our human nature as given in and through our human bodies. One of the most bookish of the neo-Blondelians is David Schindler. Liberalism "conceives the *reality* of freedom," he tells us, "to be an act of choice disjoined from an anterior order providing objective metaphysical content." He continues, "freedom is treated as a purely formal-instrumental, and thus indifferent, act." The upshot is an "ontological Pelagianism" as well as a "nominalist" view of society that reflects "liberalism's lack of a genuinely ontologically rooted, analogically conceived worldly community." These are not benign heresies: "The violence peculiar to liberal societies derives from patterns of life and thought informed by metaphysical presuppositions such as those named here."

This neo-Blondelian revival of earlier Thomistic criticisms of liberalism has become quite widespread, not just in Catholic circles, but among those influenced by John Milbank and by Stanley Hauerwas. The general idea is that liberal modernity betrays a basic pattern required for human flourishing. In it, we know something about the truth of human nature as a given, and in a realistic, non-voluntaristic worldview, this knowledge must take precedence over freedom. A chap sees the target, the good, a sitting duck at which human nature aims and fires.

The problem, as Blondel saw quite clearly even if the neo-Blondelians have forgotten, is that the duck is waiting motionless for us to fire away with our volition because it's a wooden duck, and does not exist in reality. A given human nature exists, and it is in and through this human nature that human freedom acts. No Blondelian denies this. But humanity is constituted through an ongoing series of actions. We are en route to the fullness of our created natures, which is why Blondel would deny that we can see "human nature" ahead of us. We respond (yes or no!) to the divine vocation that, as Henri de Lubac saw, constitutes the divine image in us. How could we have advance, conceptual knowledge about how each of us, as individual human persons, is called to live? Can we see who it is God beckons us to become before the very last scene of the drama? Von Balthasar would say no. We cannot define the character of any person, divine or human, outside of the "play" in which we act. Natural law may be able to tell us what cannot be in accord with human nature, but it cannot reveal to us what most fully accords with our nature, the specific way in which each of us is brought into fellowship with God.

Blondel led a generation of Catholic theologians, including de Lubac, toward a rediscovery of history, and thus of human subjectivity. The human subject is a free actor, and the ends or goals of freedom, the human goods at which it rightly aims, are not simply *objective goods*, out there for us to take hold of in cognition. Our striving for the good perfects our moral knowledge; it is not based on a pure, un-tinctured grasp of "the good." We know the good as we become it, as it becomes factored into our personalities through our choices.

oth God and man are mysteries in and of themselves, in their deepest nature. In their existential and historical givenness—in the economy of salvation and the economies of free human action—God and finite human beings are an enigmatic mixture of display and even deeper concealment. We can only find the hidden treasure of our personality, the person God wants for us to be, by freely venturing to become that person in each and every action. We are called to act in the full light of knowledge of the natural law, and of Mother Church’s teachings, of course. But we must also figure what it is God wants us to do in each *next step*. It is this deep, existential inscrutability of persons, and the enigma of right choices, which we see reflected in a liberal society, one that makes space for both political and economic freedom.

We discover the “persona”—the life-fulfilling role that God wants us to take on within the drama of human history—in and through our free actions. Only liberal societies fully affirm this process of discovery, insisting that it is the vocation of all persons, not just rulers, or others whom society empowers. This discovery cannot be made until every last free choice is on the table and in full view of all, which is why human nature is dramatic. In our faithful response to God’s call, we realize the fullness of the divine image within us. Blondel saw this clearly. Yes, truth is the measure of freedom, for Blondel, as for any realist. But free action is the only way we fully expose ourselves to truth’s power to shape us. Again, only liberal societies recognize that we need to risk ourselves in ventures of our own choosing, not just in the important political projects we’re responsible for in a democratic order, but also in the seemingly trivial but often consequential choices we make in the economic realm. It’s in the vulnerable give-and-take of the marketplace that reality most often pierces our self-protective fantasies and convenient deceptions. In the political realm, sadly, ideology can long resist its own falsification.

The Christian liberal, following Blondel, does not deny truth when he gives free action priority over truth. Rather, he realizes that free embodied action is a prerequisite of our coming to know truth more fully. Thought becomes clear to itself when it is articulated; the sculptor knows his idea only as his hands touch the stone. So, also, we begin to grasp our natures in and through the exercise of freedom. For this reason, the liberal can be relatively inarticulate about the good,

something many critics of liberalism, such as Manent, have taken to be a grave defect. He knows that he must run toward it to know it. This kind of liberalism does not deny truth. Quite the contrary, leavened by a Christian understanding of our final end in God, liberalism provides a social, political, and economic outlook that does justice to the fact that the full truth of each person's particular humanity is necessarily withheld until, at the end of the play, the actor receives his full "name" and identity from God. We are not fully ourselves until we have arrived at our destination.

It would be idle to deny that many contemporary liberal cultures forget these truths. But beleaguering "liberalism" with a panoply of scholastic insults is not the way to waken the negligent liberal to the existential truths that undergird our society. Do we encourage liberalism to remember its birth in a market economy that drew ordinary people into habits of free action for the sake of satisfying desires, or do we anathematize it for its self-caricature as a Gnostic-capitalist heresy?

Our free will and our reason must be put into play in order for us to discover the truth about ourselves. Capitalism makes some people richer than others, a few vastly richer. It has always been so, however, and we're foolish to ignore the fact that economic freedom, for all its perils (perhaps because of its perils) provides most of us with a powerful experience of free will and reason in action. True, reason calculates rather than contemplates, and freedom is often oriented toward self-interest rather than self-giving. But to feel the tug of desire, even consumer desire, and to gather ourselves for action to satisfy our desires—this is what it means to be human. Only when our freedom is engaged can we begin to ascend toward our drama's true end.

Liberalism is no heresy, and the market exchange from which it emerges does not sin against the light. It is a healthy byproduct of Christianity, and the only means by which Christians can fight Marxist-capitalism, the stage-managed freedom in which the benevolent will of the powerful consults reason, discerns what people "truly" need and want, and then superintends over and administers the always vulnerable freedom of ordinary people. If one were searching for Gnostic

heresies, surely this technocratic political economy, which is very much with us today, is a good candidate for anathema.

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