

The Biblical Roots of American Liberty, Part 2: Respecting Individual Rights in an Orderly Society

This is part two of a three-part essay on America's Christian roots. For part one, visit [here](#).

Religion and the Social Order

Religion, at its fundamental level, offers a set of postulates about the universe and man's place therein, including a theory of human nature, its origin, its potentials, and its destination. Religion deals with the meaning and purpose of life, with man's chief good, and the meaning of right and wrong. Thus, religious axioms and premises provide the basic materials political philosophy works with. The political theorist must assume that men and women are thus and so, before he can figure out what sort of social and legal arrangements provide the fittest habitat for such creatures as we humans are. So, some religion lies at the base of every social order.

It is the religion of dialectical materialism that is the take-off point for the Marxian theory and practice of the total state. Hinduism is basic to the structures of Indian society. Western society, Christendom, was shaped and molded by Christianity.

Incorporated into Western civilization were elements from the Bible, as well as ingredients from Greece and Rome. This composite was lived, worked over, and thought out for nearly 1,800 years by the peoples of Europe.

And then something new emerged and began to take root in the

New World; it was the recovery of that part of the Christian story needed to ransom society from despotism and erect the structures of a free society wherein men and women might enjoy their birthright of economic and political liberty.

A vision emerged of a society where men and women would be free to pursue their personal goals, unimpeded by the fetters of rank, privilege, caste, or estate that had hitherto consigned people to roles determined by custom and command, not by their own choice.

The people who settled these shores during the 17th and 18th centuries were children of the Reformation driven by their need to worship God as it pleased them, according to their own wisdom and conscience. Believing that God had entered into a covenant with His people, they freely covenanted together to form churches. This was later called "the gathered church idea," seemingly endorsed by Jesus Himself in Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The local New England church in the Puritan period had full ecclesiastical authority to ordain its minister and appoint deacons and elders. Its minister could celebrate communion, perform christenings, baptisms, and marriages, and conduct funerals—all on the authority of the local church. Each church was in voluntary fellowship with other churches, but in authority over none. The covenant pattern of the early New England churches was the paradigm for the federalist political structure erected two centuries ago. The West was moving from status to contract, as Sir Henry Maine would observe in 1861.

This concern for individual liberty in society was not limited to theologians. Tom Paine generally took a critical stance when dealing with religion and the church, but in 1775 in an essay entitled "Thoughts on Defensive War" he wrote as follows: "In the barbarous ages of the world, men in general had no liberty. The strong governed the weak at will; 'till

the coming of Christ there was no such thing as political freedom in any part of the Romans held the world in slavery and were themselves slaves of their political as well as spiritual freedom is the gift of God through Christ." And Edward Gibbon, so critical of the Church in his history of Rome, nevertheless pays tribute to "those benevolent principles of Christianity, which inculcate the natural freedom of mankind."

Our forebears of a couple of centuries ago regarded human freedom as a religious imperative. They loved to quote such biblical texts as: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," (2 Cor. 3:17) and "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all the inhabitants thereof." (Lev. 25:10) They struggled for freedom of worship; they fought for the right to speak their minds, and for a free press to put their convictions into written form. They also had firm convictions about private property. The popular slogan of the time was "Life, Liberty, and Property!" Property meant the right of private ownership. Adam Smith and his *Wealth of Nations* came along at just the right time—with what Smith called his "liberal plan of liberty, equality and justice"—to become the economic counterpart of the political ideas of the Declaration of Independence.

The Importance of the Individual

The central doctrine of the American political system is our belief in the inviolability of the individual man or woman. This is one of the self-evident truths enunciated in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." The "equality" which is the key idea of the Declaration means "equal justice," the Rule of Law, the same rules for everybody because we are one in our essential humanity.

The reflections of H. L. Mencken on this point are intriguing as coming from a man usually critical of religion. In 1926 Mencken wrote an essay entitled "Equality Before the Law." "Of all the ideas associated with the general concept of democratic government," he wrote, "the oldest and perhaps the soundest is that of equality before the law. Its relation to the scheme of Christian ethics is too obvious to need statement. It goes back, through the political and theological theorizing of the middle ages, to the early Christian notion of equality before debt of democracy to Christianity has always been before Rousseau was ever heard of, or Locke or Hobbes, the fundamental principles of democracy were plainly stated in the New Testament, and elaborately expounded by the early fathers, including St. Augustine.

"Today, in all Christian countries, equality before the law is almost as axiomatic as equality before God. A statute providing one punishment for A and another for B, both being guilty of the same act, would be held unconstitutional everywhere, and not only unconstitutional, but also in plain contempt of common decency and the inalienable rights of man. The chief aim of most of our elaborate legal machinery is to give effect to that idea. It seeks to diminish and conceal the inequities that divide men in the general struggle for existence, and to bring them before the bar of justice as exact equals."

The freedom quest of Western man, as it has exhibited itself periodically over the past 20 centuries, is not a characteristic of man as such. It is a cultural trait, philosophically and religiously inspired. The basic religious vision of the West regards the planet earth as the creation of a good God who gives a man a soul and makes him responsible for its proper ordering; puts him on earth as a sort of junior partner with dominion over the earth; admonishes him to be fruitful and multiply; commands him to work; makes him a steward of the earth's scarce resources; holds him accountable

for their economic use; and makes theft wrong because property is right. When this outlook comes to prevail, the groundwork is laid for a free and prosperous commonwealth such as we aspired to on this continent.

A Created Being in a Created World

We gaze out upon the world around us and are struck by the preponderance of order, harmony, beauty, balance, intelligence, and economy in the way it works. The thought strikes us that the explanation of the world is not contained within the world itself, but is to be sought in a Source outside the world. The Bible simply declares that God created the world, and when He had finished He looked out upon the world He had created and called it good. The biblical world is not *Maya*—as Hinduism calls its world; it is not a mirage or an illusion. Nor is the world of nature holy; only God is holy. The created world, including the realm of nature, is “the school of hard knocks.” The earth challenges us to understand its workings so that we might learn to use it responsibly to serve our purposes. Economics and the free enterprise system teach us how to use the planet’s scarce resources providently, efficiently, and non-wastefully—in order to produce more of the things we need.

Man comes onto the world scene as a created being. As a created being, man is a work of divine art and not a mere happening; he possesses free will and the ability to order his own actions. As such, he is a responsible being. He’s no mere chance excrescence tossed up haphazardly by physical and chemical forces, shaped by accidental variations in his environment. To the contrary, man is endowed with a portion of the divine creativity, giving him the power to dynamically transform himself, and his environment as well, according to his needs and his vision of what ought to be.

The other orders of creation—animals, birds, bees, fish, and so on—live by the dictates of their instincts. But our species

has no such infallible inner guidelines as our fellow creatures possess; our guidelines are formulated in the moral code, as summed up in the Ten Commandments.

Ethical relativism is a popular attitude today; it is a wrong answer to questions such as: Is there a moral code? Are there moral laws? Let me summarize briefly the argument that our universe has a built-in moral order by showing that there is a striking parallel between the laws of physical nature and moral laws.

The laws of science transcribe into words the observed causal regularities in the world of physical nature, i.e., the realm of things which can be measured, weighed, and counted. This is one sector of reality. Reality also exhibits a moral dimension, where things are valued or disdained on a scale of ethics ranging from good to evil. Biological survival depends on conforming our actions to the laws of nature; ignorance is no excuse. Social survival, the enhancement of individual life in society, depends on willing obedience to the moral code that condemns murder, theft, false witness, and the rest. Transgressors lead us toward social decay and cultural disorder.

Your individual *physical* survival depends on several factors. If you want to go on living you need so many cubic feet of air per hour, or you suffocate. You need a minimum number of calories per day, or you starve. If you lack certain vitamins and minerals specific diseases will appear. There is a temperature range within which human life is possible: too low and you freeze, too high and you roast. These are some of the requirements you must meet for individual bodily survival. They are not statutory requirements, nor are they mere custom. They are laws of this physical universe, which one can deny only at his peril.

This is the second part of a three-part essay. Read part one [here](#), and join us tomorrow for part three.

The Rev. Edmund A. Opitz (1914-2006) was a Congregationalist minister, a FEE staff member, who for decades championed the cause of a free society and the need to anchor that society in a transcendent morality. A man of wide reading and high culture, Opitz was for many years on the staff of the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. He was one of the few voices in the 1950s through the 1990s calling for an integrated understanding between economic liberty and religious sensibility. He was the founder and coordinator of the Remnant, a fellowship of conservative and libertarian ministers.

For the original story, visit [.](#)