

Free Will Entails Free Markets

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I propose an intimate, perhaps desirable, but anyway strong, connection between the human free will of Abrahamic theology and the free human action of modern liberal ideology. By “liberal” I do not mean the odd use of the term in the United States during the century past, namely, “tentative democratic socialism.” (Nor, certainly, do I mean its even odder use in Latin America, “confident military dictatorship.”) I mean its use internationally, as in Europe now and in the 19th century, that is, a society of free people. It originated in the 18th century as an entirely new idea in secular use (though not new in theology) that all people are created equal in dignity and – this is the new and secular part – are equal in permissions of all sorts, from economic to social. Hierarchies of lord and servant natural to an agricultural society were to be overturned. No slaves or serfs, no beaten wives or beaten protestors.

The very word “liberalism” contains the program. “Liberal” is of course from Latin *liber*, long understood by the slave-holding ancients 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.” By 1776 among advanced intellectuals, liberalism had become fashionable. The year 1776 is most notable, you know, for the publication of Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Liberalism’s hour came then rather suddenly by historical standards, but not inexplicably. From 1517 to 1789 the north and especially the northwest of Europe and its offshoots witnessed reformations and revolts and revolutions that in their happier outcomes encouraged anti-slavery, liberal declarations to resound. Consider for example the declaration by the conflicted Virginia slave-owner and deist that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Also in 1776.

Liberalism, that is, was the theory of a society consisting entirely, if ideally, of free people. No slaves at all. (Jefferson did not, unlike Washington, free his slaves, except his four surviving adult children by the slave Sally Hemings, his wife’s half sister begat by his father on law; after all, we are talking here about a theory, not always a practice.) No masters. No kings. No popes. (Liberalism was and remains Protestant, even Quaker – or Early Church.) Equality of status. (Immortal souls were of course equal in Abrahamic theology; but until liberalism they were in this life to take up uncomplainingly their unequal burdens, and not whine about hierarchies of permissions in guild or government.) No pushing people around by physical coercion. Sweet talking. Minimally violent. Accepting of difference. No state racism. No imperialism. No unnecessary taxes. No domination of women by men. No beating of children or apprentices. No messing with other people’s stuff or persons or businesses. It is Adam

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Smith's "liberal plan of [social equality, [economic] liberty, and [legal] justice," the obvious and simple system of natural liberty."²

Such a liberal economy, I claim, is consistent with a Christian life, employing a free will constrained by ethical treatment of others and oneself and God. Statism, the theory that we need to be supervised as children or slaves, planned by our masters, driven by secular authorities to this or that faith, is not Christian. A century-long supposition among many theologians has claimed on the contrary that belief in a just and loving God entails socialism, and driving the economy. It does not.

To be sure, as the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart notes in the postscript to his recent translation of the New Testament, the Christian testament has very many passages in which God's word interpreted by humans demands literally or in effect that the rich give away their goods and follow Jesus.³ The Christian gospels and many a Christian theologian early and late do 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."⁴ 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."⁵ 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."⁶ As do 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 prosperity of the tiny group of Parsis in Pakistan, northwest India, and England).

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, 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."⁷ *Imago Dei*. Nor is it surprising that the religion sprung from a merchant of Mecca "protects and endorses 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."⁸

2 Smith 1777 (1976, 1981), 4.9, p. 664; 4, 9, p. 687.

3 Hart 2017.

4 Chaudhuri 1959, p. 178; compare his Chp. V, "Money and the Englishman."

5 Knott, *Hindusim* 1998, p. 15. Compare another translation in Embree, ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. I, p. 9. Sanskrit's cousinhood to Latin shows in *Agni :: ignus*, hearth

6 <http://www.avesta.org/avesta.html>, at Afrinagan Dahman.

7 Quoted in Sacks 2002, p. 87.

8 Both of these are mottoes to Chapter 2 in Novak 1996, p. 41.

What is surprising is that a Christendom thus unusually hostile to commerce, profit, trade, gain would in the 19th century commence admiring the bourgeois life and encouraging, out of liberalism, a universally enriching “innovism” (a word for the modern system much to be preferred 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 in the 19th century a bourgeois but still seriously Christian Europe invented the ideal of socialism, at first in an explicitly Christian form. Marx and Engels in 1848 sneered at the turn: “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.”⁹ Yet most non-Marxists of the left down the to present retain an economic faith tintured by Christian socialism.

Socialism, too, contains its program in the very word: like a family (of 328.2 million), we shall make social, not individual decisions. Erasmus in the 1508 and later editions of his big collection of Latin tags 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 to societies of 328.2 million strangers. Or even of 6.1 million, like Sweden in 1928. 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, consecrated by the holy water of a Christian socialism or Catholic social teaching or the social gospel. It emphasized not Marx’s class struggle but in a liberal echo a sweet society of (often formerly) Christian friends, such as advocated by 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.”¹⁰ Do good by doing poorly.

I am giving the word “socialism,” you will note, a baggy definition, ranging from housing regulation up to communism-with-gulags. The housing regulation, which seems so mild and reasonable, is of course necessarily backed by physical coercion, however seldom in ordinary circumstances it 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, say, you will be fined. If you don’t pay the fine, you will be jailed. If you try to escape you will be shot.

My intent in the baggy definition is not to tar my numerous social democratic friends with Stalinism. It is to persuade them to stop thinking that there exists a magical third term between coercion and persuasion, between state action and non-coerced inter-action. I am willing to stipulate, for the sake of argument, that social democracy is stable, and does not slowly or quickly devolve into East-German tyranny and the rule by *Stasi*. I do not claim that housing regulations, say, lead inevitably to a larger and larger state, on the road to serfdom – though it *is* reasonable to worry about such a devolution, as the less self-critical of social democrats, such as Paul Krugman and Elizabeth Warren, do not. The true liberals since Voltaire and Smith and Wollstonecraft have recommended a restrained state, and the practice as much as is practical of persuasion in voluntary exchange. Thus in 1776 Thomas Paine, who

9 Marx and Engels 1848, p. 77.

10 Ellsberg 1983, p. xxv.

was a free trader: “government even in its best state is but a necessary evil, in its worst state an intolerable one.”¹¹ Or in 1849 Henry David Thoreau, who improved the machinery in his father’s pencil manufactory: “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.”¹² Modern social democrats and High “Liberals” have attacked such common sense and civil disobedience, and yearn for the warm embrace of the parent-state, bigger and bigger as they believe a Christian charity demands. *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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

Even in 1910 the Reverend Williams was wrong factually, and the facts became less and less supportive as the 20th century proceeded. Commercially tested betterment and the astonishing creativity of steam and steel had even by 1910 yielded unprecedented common prosperity and happiness. The prosperity of working people had doubled since 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, and if the higher quality of goods (food, housing, education) is taken into account more like a factor of thirty or forty. Yet the clerisy had long since, as George Bernard Shaw noted in 1912, turned against the economic innovism out of political liberalism, looking 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. . . . 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.”¹⁵

In 1919 Paul Tillich, then a 33-year old Protestant pastor in Germany, wrote with his friend Carl Richard Wegener an “Answer to an Inquiry of the Protestant Consistory of Brandenburg: “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.”¹⁶ As the professional economist and amateur theologian the late Robert Nelson put it in 2001, “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

11 Paine 1776, p. 6.

12 Thoreau 1849, p. 1, first sentence.

13 Personal communication, November 2014

14 Williams 1910.

15 Shaw 1912.

16 Tillich and Wegener 1919.

market economy has appeared to many people as the religious equivalent of approving of sin.”¹⁷

The economy in this view is a zero-sum game, a species of football. One might claim correctly, in 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.¹⁸ 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. I say again that such a view, though commonplace in the 20th century among Christian folk, is mistaken factually. 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 fully 3,000 percent, dwarfing any gain 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 came after a while to yield in the new game scores of 840 to 210. The rich still “won,” if sports-talk is how you wish to speak, but the formerly poor now enjoyed full human lives that were denied in the days of 7. Startling though the magnitude is, no competent student of economics, economic history, or public health would disagree.¹⁹ The poor are not always with us, not since political liberalism and economic innovism took hold.

And conceptually speaking, innovism is the opposite of sinful “deliberate egoism.” It achieves the solidarity of all people through voluntary exchanges among the 6.1 or 328.2 or for that matter 7,800 million souls rather than through the coerced allocation inside a household run by lordly parents, or by economists, or by commissars. Liberalism is the adult system of thoroughgoing cooperation with strangers. The Good Samaritan’s one-on-one gift was glorious. 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 a craft is selfish, and property fruitless, unless the seller’s product out of them is advantageous to the other, in the opinion of the other – who then willingly gives over the profit from her own selling of labor or craft or property. Innovism.

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The Christian clerisy has not listened recently to such liberal reflections. There are two ways only of changing the behavior of other people – to get them, say, to stop using the solecism “the *hoi polloi*.” One way is coercion, jailing the numerous academics, for instance, who use the offending phrase. I admit to flirting with such a solution, but on liberal reflection curb the impulse to use such quick, direct coercion. The other is persuasion, sweet talk (“Learn, dear, that *hoi* means ‘the.’ In the masculine plural. Used as the common gender.”), or the not-so-sweet-talk of ridicule (“You idiot – who so disgracefully has less Greek than I have!”). Coercion is often quicker – “Your money or your life” (Jack Benny: “I’m thinking, I’m thinking!”) Persuasion takes a while. It’s the difference between a lawyer-policy – pass a law backed by coercion to control pollution directly – and an economist-policy – let a carbon tax (admittedly itself coercive, though less directly) do the job by mutually persuasive interaction.

Physical coercion by one human over another is bad *in Christian theology*, being an offense to the free will granted by a loving God. Yet socialism, technicalities and lovely

17 Nelson 2001, p. 331.

18 See Wright 2019.

19 Rosling et. al, 2018; McCloskey 2016.

intentionalities aside, is the making of economic decisions by the general will, Rousseau's *volunté générale*, enforced (note the word) by physical coercion. Rousseau believed that the phrase *volunté générale* magically resolved the obvious tension between individual action and state coercion.²⁰ If you voluntarily join in the general will, he asked, what's the problem? And you, happily, will so join, as the nature of man under socialism evolves away from a wickedly bourgeois nature. Rousseau's oxymoronic notion of a voluntary coercion survives in political theory under the notion of a social contract. (But ask: have you signed a social contract recently?) The only alternatives to such socialized decision-making are the decisions made by the God-given individual wills interacting without physical coercion with other humans. The result is not a harsh social Darwinism, a country-club disdain for the poor. It is giving to others in an ethical manner the dignity of respect, autonomy, self-rule, free will within serious ethics. After all, most human arrangements are of this character, and especially so outside of tyrannies: language is for example; and art; science, love, and manners, too. Even football games.

Admittedly, Rousseau's notion is parallel in theology to voluntarily acceding to God's inevitable law. And admittedly the economy, the language, love, football, and art, science, and manners, too, make use of customary agreements to arrive at this or that action – what the economist James Buchanan called “constitutional political economy,” and what linguists and linguistic philosophers call “conversational implicatures.”²¹ Yet ever since Rousseau the implicit agreement with the general will has been used routinely by tyrants to justify coercion. In the USSR for example someone who did not agree with the general will discerned by Stalin or his successors was judged to be quite mad, and would be put under the coercive care of psychiatrists.

In logic, I say, the individual will is either coerced or liberated, either is a coerced machine or has free will: there is no third term. Yet coercion, any true liberal readily admits, is not always bad. A legitimate exercising of the general will would be compulsory inoculation for smallpox, say; or reporting for duty in a draft army if the perfidious Canadians are invading Maine; or rapid response to a novel coronavirus. The state, as Max Weber put it in 1919, can with justice claim “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical constraint/ force/ violence/ coercion” (“*das Monopol legitimen physischen Zwanges*”).²² Good. Such a monopoly is greatly to be preferred to oligopolies of gangs running around physically coercing people.

But one must keep in mind, as the riot police gather, that the justified monopoly does necessarily involve physical coercion, which should be very closely watched: they have the guns. Markets 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 unless the word “coercion” is so extended in meaning that any influence, voluntary or physical, words or actions, advertising or billy clubs is deemed “coercive.” Then all is coercive, nothing non-coercive, and we are doomed to an absence of will. And the stoics, with Christian quietism, went to the other extreme, claiming that external slavery allows nonetheless an internal freedom. As the philosophical stoic emperor of Rome and stoic slave of Greece 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.”

20 Rousseau 1762, Book IV, paragraph 4.

21 Buchanan 1987 and Grice 1989

22 Weber 1919 (1994), p. 310.

Such extensions of meaning are rife in the philosophical discussion of free will.²³ 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 no better than state coercion in employment or in opinion, as in Stalin's Russia or Mao's China.

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In Erasmus' debate during the 1520s with Luther over freedom of the will, he turned the discussion towards the social and ethical consequences of a supposed lack of it. Such a liberal trope of argument was characteristic of the Prince of the Humanists, and I adopt it here. The arguments about free will have taken place mostly at the top level, so to speak, of God's freedom. Erasmus in his debate with Luther moves to the level of human psychology. He argues for a middle position between the dual dangers of "indifference" and "hopelessness" in predestination or of "arrogance" in supposing that one can by works alone achieve salvation.²⁴ I think it wise to stay at such a level, about which we have actual information and experience, and can then reflect with some chance of conclusion about ethics and law, instead of insisting on rising to metaphysics, where paradoxes abound, and appear to be hopeless. I take a position similar to that of Anglicanism, as in Richard Hooker in the 1690s, the middle course between the Romans and the Calvinists. Anglicanism, at any rate when not burning Catholic priests, was so to speak Erasmian, a religion for people in community – the lord of the manor and the plowman worshipping in the same village church. (Well, I admit the romance in such a view.)

The theology about it hangs on the word "intentional." Progressive Christians such as Pope Francis' favorite economist, Stefano Zamagni, declare, contrary to the historical evidence and the economic logic, that conscious, planned, intentional action at the group level, the *volonté générale*, is what is needed in order to improve the world.²⁵ Francis himself, a child of Liberation Theology in Argentina, said, "as long as the world economy has at its center the god of money and not the person. . . This is fundamental terrorism, against all humanity."²⁶ But no one makes money without pleasing the person, saving her from starvation, educating her children, giving her a full life in which she can praise God. Contrary to such an obvious link between "money" and the person, the society cannot rely, say Zamagni, and Francis, on any of those silly "neo-liberal" invisible hands or spontaneous orders of the sort that determine, I note again, the evolution of the Italian language or of Milanese fashion. Thus an Episcopal priest in the United States declares in her July 4 sermon 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).

I disagree on the matter with Zamagni and with the Pope and with my beloved pastor, Amity Carrubba, as with many other good-hearted folk. The independence of the individual in a liberal economy lets people exchange as they wish with free will – and it results in the great and good interdependence of modern life. The Catholic conservative Patrick Deneen is quite

23 Kane, ed., 2002.

24 Erasmus 1524 (2013), p. 85.

25 Zamagni 2010.

26 Quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2016

wrong to assert that liberalism denies community. On the contrary, it celebrates a non-coercive and ethical interdependence.²⁷ Catholic social teaching of the sort Zamagni and Deneen retail doesn't get the point. One-to-one cooperation is splendid, I have noted, and certainly subject to "intentionality." You give virtuously to the worthy beggar, intentionally, consciously, in full knowledge of the beneficiary, though you may also as Adam Smith practiced and as Jesus recommended do so anonymously. But one-to-*many* cooperation is by far more significant, beyond the Desert Fathers in their hermitages. Your shoes, food, housing, bibles, educations, and whatever come of course from the voluntary paid work of thousands of people worldwide.

They and you are cooperating every day, for producing a baguette for the interest of the family and the dignity of the craftsperson. Interdependence gives everyone a mutually voluntary access to the talents and resources of everyone else. People do not know personally their benefactors who grind the flour for their baguette or drive the truck to deliver it to the baker. As the liberal economist Friedrich Hayek explained, in his Germanic English, "in an order taking advantage of the higher productivity of extensive division of labour, the individual can no longer know whose needs his efforts do or ought to serve, or what will be the effects of his actions on those unknown persons who do consume his products or products to which he has contributed."²⁸ Nonetheless the buyer receives the correct signal from its price, learning the opportunity cost to other people, which is to be compared with the gain to the buyer. Benefit minus cost is gain to the person and to the society. It is, to use the business jargon, "value creating." The economist's word is simply "profit." Profit is not an arbitrary extraction out of the pile of gold in the back room of the boss, or a sign of the continuing presence of sin in the world. It is the sign of "ál trádes, their gear and tackle and trim. / All things counter, original, spare, strange; . . . / He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him."²⁹

You can choose in a liberal society the life of a desert hermit if you feel so inclined, and 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 Smith's bakery rather than Karl'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 they would recommend cutting off trade with your neighbor down the street. Make your own accordion; grow your own wheat. To the contrary, listen again to the Blessed Adam Smith: "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."³⁰

The American theologian and writer Frederick Buechner 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."³¹ I approve of his economic talk of a tradeoff, and understand the theological point – that one can for instance be enslaved to corrupting desires, and that a loving Lord is a

27 Deneen 2018; McCloskey 2018.

28 Hayek 1968, p. 81.

29 The lines are from the poem, "Pied Beauty," by Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit (1844–1889).

30 Smith 1776 (1976, 1891), 1.1.11, pp. 22–23.

31 Buechner 2009, p. 119. I m grateful to Amity Carrubba for the reference.

better choice of master. But the concession to non-freedom (or more precisely in English usage 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 conclusion: "Let every soul be subordinate to higher authorities. For there is no authority except under God." "Render unto Caesar" was perhaps a necessary tactic at the time for a Roman 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.

The problems with the axiom of obedience as freedom/liberty are two. For one thing, it assumes silently that you, dear child, need to be governed by a lordly *human*, beyond a personal God. It would be better to recommend "obedience" to a liberal ideology of liberty from coercion by other humans. Such an ideology, I say, is perfectly consistent with, indeed implied by, by a choice of redemption through Christ of creatures made in God's image. The point is that Christian theology does not require a human commissar in charge of getting the corn crop out of Iowa, nor (the radical Protestants claim) a church hierarchy of humans designing your life choices.

For another, to make an ancient point, a free will is meaningless unless it is free. Freedom means the freedom to sin, too. It is like the economic liberty from tyrannical and know-it-all lords in Washington to make what the lords consider your mistake in opening a hairdressing salon in the neighborhood, or putting forward the NeXt computer. Any sort of Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism, or any other faith short of a grim Calvinism of predestination, is consistent with God-given free will. Buechner would not deny it. But he emphasizes, quite reasonably, that tradeoffs do exist, that a "perfect," entirely fancy-free freedom is impossible in the created world in which God has placed us. True enough. There are no "Big Rock Candy Mountains, / .. . a land that's fair and bright, / Where the handouts grow on bushes / And the sun shines every day / On the birds and the bees / And the cigarette trees." Or there was no such land even approximately until the Great Enrichment of 3,000 percent out of liberty.

But the English language has a serious problem with the word "freedom," a Germanic word (thus *Freiheit*) which, as usual in English after the Norman Conquest, has a Romance near-synonym, from *libertas*, "liberty." Liberty in English is ordinarily an explicitly political word, pointing to absence of human tyranny. But freedom, though it can likewise mean political or economic freedom – Isaiah Berlin's "negative" liberty – also has a connotation, becoming stronger in the age of statist schemes for regulation and redistribution, of "positive" liberty.³² Negative liberty is the right not to be coercively interfered with by others, with exceptions for covid 19. "Positive" so-called liberty, however, is the ability to do things. You are in this expansive sense "free" if you have super power to fly faster than a speeding bullet, or "free" if you are rich enough to buy a hundred-foot yacht. But wait: English already has other, perfectly good expressions for the ability to do things: income, wealth, capabilities, political power, authority, super powers, Concorde airplane flights.

The modern discussion of "freedom," that is, as in Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech or in Amartya Sen's declaration that (economic) development *is* freedom, is muddled. It has repurposed the word "freedom" in order to add income-and-power connotations to the meaning of the opposite of tyranny – liberty. That way one can, for example, use tyranny to achieve

32 Berlin 1958 (2002).

“freedom,” that is, higher income, as in the alleged Chinese model (in fact China has achieved a certain prosperity by liberty in its economy, if nothing like it in its politics). It’s the verbal trick that merges liberalism with statism among American “liberals.”

The true liberal by contrast wants a word for non-tyranny by other humans. Free will does not promise to exempt you from the laws of physics. God places you in a real world, where you are not a pet without free will. It is a world in which the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 can occur but in which you also have a relevant choice between sin and redemption. God does not want you, in God’s image, to be a slave to another human. Or so a true-liberal theology would say, as Erasmus said: “By freedom of the will we will understand in the connection the power of the human will whereby man an apply to or turn away from that which leads to eternal salvation.”³³

In short, a secular, human lordship, an absence of liberty, is not inevitable, 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 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.

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So much for a sketch of the political economy of liberty implicated in theology. It leads to a new and truly liberal public theology.

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 make us free, not slaves. A parent, and God, wants us to be free 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.³⁴

As the theologian and Biblical scholar Shawna Atteberry 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 grace be free. If we lived in Eden, it would not be so. But, as free adults in a real world governed by natural and social laws, we chose, as Eve chose, and in the tale as Adam too chose by the persuadable will of a free man.

The über-liberal “Austrian” economics speaks of free will as “human action.” Orthodox, non-liberal public theology by contrast wants the state and God to treat us like obedient pets, not free wills. And orthodox, non-Austrian economics nowadays views people as reactive, maximizing utility under a constraint, like grass seeking light and water optimally. No, I say again. God made us in the *imago Dei/Deae*. Free.

³³ Erasmus 1524 (2004), p. 26.

³⁴ See Haskell 1999 on the extraordinarily recent history of “responsibility.”

Cooperation does not by any means, that is, always require intentional direct action on the model of the good Samaritan, and especially does not require the coercive action of a taxing and regulating state. When Jesus' fishermen sold their catch – the abundant one arranged for them by Jesus – they intended only to help their own families. But thousands ate. The unintended consequence of specialization and trade is a social miracle analogous to the divine miracle of loaves and fishes.

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The great economist Frank Knight (1885–1972), in an anti-clerical fury, mistook the Christian morality of charity as a call to common ownership, the extreme of loving solidarity, and attacked it as unworkable. (It is said that the only time the University of Chicago has actually refunded 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 with T. W. Merriam in 1945 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."³⁵

It develops 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.³⁶ Their source is always the Gospels, never the elaborate compromises with economic reality 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 1991.³⁷ These men were not to put it mildly 19th-century liberals – especially, as the Catholic but liberal public intellectual Michael Novak explained, not in a harsh and old Continental sense.³⁸ The popes celebrated 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.

Thus Leo: "private possessions are clearly in accord with nature" (15), following his hero, Aquinas.³⁹ "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"

35 Knight and Merriam 1945, pp. 29, 30, 31, 46.

36 See for example Knight and Merriam 1945, p. 48.

37 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 is my guide here: *Catholic Social Thought*, 1984, Chps. 6-8.

38 Novak 1984, Chaps. 6-8.

39 Leo XIII. 1891. *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph numbers given. See Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, c. 1270, IIa IIae, Q 66, quoted and discussed in Fleischacker 2004, p. 35 and n40.

(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).

Nick Hornby’s comic novel *How to Be Good* (2001) shows the difficulties of To Each According to His Need, Regardless of His Property Acquired by Effort Directed at Supplying Goods and Services That Other People Are Willing Themselves to Expend The Effort to Acquire. A graceful generosity that works just fine within a family leads to uniform wretchedness within a large group of strangers. In Hornby’s book the husband of the narrator goes mad and starts giving away his and his wife’s money and his children’s superfluous toys. He and his guru are going to write a book:

“‘How to Be Good’, we’re going to call it. It’s about how we should all live our lives. You know, suggestions. Like taking in the homeless, and giving away your money, and what to do about things like property ownership and, I don’t know, the Third World and so on.”

“So” [replies his annoyed wife, a hard-working GP in the National Health Service] “this book’s aimed at high-ranking employees of the IMF?”⁴⁰

It’s a version of the Sermon on the Mount. “The love-gospel,” write Knight and Merriam, “condemning all self-assertion as sin . . . would destroy all values.”⁴¹ 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 a less fierce 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. Leo was a close student of Aquinas, and in 1889 elevated him to dogma within the Church. 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 “if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.” Given that people are imperfect, the Christian, or indeed any economist would say, we need to make allowances, and hire lawyers. Otherwise everyone will live by stealing each other’s coats, with a resulting failure to produce coats in the first place, and the life of humans will be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

St. Paul himself said so, in his earliest extant letter: “Neither did we eat any man’s bread for naught; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you . . . to make ourselves an example unto you to follow us. . . . We commanded you that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some . . . among you disorderly, working not at all.”⁴² Or to put it more positively, as Michael Novak did, “one must think clearly about what actually does work – in a sinful world – to achieve the liberation of peoples and persons.”⁴³ “In the right of property,” wrote even the blessed Pope John XXIII in

40 Hornby 2001, p. 210.

41 Knight and Merriam 1945, p. 50.

42 1 Tim. 3: 8-11.

43 Novak 1984, p. xvi.

1961, “the exercise of liberty finds both a safeguard and a stimulus.”⁴⁴ 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 want them, too, the gift-economy of grace above material concerns.⁴⁵ But to make them into a social system, *How to Be Good*, is to cancel their virtue. We are mostly not friends, but strangers, and even in the Society of Friends property was not held in common. Knight and Merriam were not really facing Christian orthodoxy and Christian ethics. They were misunderstanding it. One owes Love to a family first. Property, with the virtue of justice, protects the beloved family. 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, an admiration that has since 1800 raised up the wretched of the earth. True, the narrator and the wife of the madman in *How to Be Good* cannot quite get rid of the notion that “maybe the desire for nice evenings with people I know and love is essentially bourgeois, reprehensible – depraved, even.”⁴⁶ Such is the agony of the sweet left.

It is liberalism, a fulfillment at last of the Abrahamic equality of souls, that brings us human flourishing and human virtue, as God wishes for creations.

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To all this the Christian statist has a series of worries, replies, indignant objections. I do not expect to convert her on the spot, and refer merely to the collected evidence.

For one thing, she says, work is not “free.” We are “wage slaves.” The claim was in fact the defense of actual slavery offered by Southern apologists before the Civil War in the United States. The Northern factory workers, they said, were virtual slaves. The leftish usage and its politics echo down to the present, as in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* of 1999, in which “wage slave” is defined coolly as “a person who is wholly dependent on income from employment,” with the notation “informal” – but not “ironic” or “jocular” or, better, “economically illiterate.”⁴⁷ Thus Judy Pearsall, the editor of the *Concise Oxford*, who lives, it may be, in a nice semidetached in London NW6 and drives an old Volvo, is a “slave.” You yourself are probably a slave. I certainly am a slave. We are all “slaves” – though all of us are paid in proportion to the traded value of goods and services we produce for others and none of us owes *unpaid*, involuntary service to any boss (except to the state in taxes; hmm.) Such progressive or conservative terminology of “wage slavery” is like calling an exchange of harsh words “verbal rape.” We need terms for the physical violence entailed in actual slavery and in actual rape, or for that matter in actual taxation backed by the wide powers of the IRS to do violence. We should not cheapen them by applying them to our middle-class guilt in NW6 or Morningside Heights.

One finds Oscar Wilde in 1891 declaring that “socialism [about which he knew only the contents of a lecture he had just heard by George Bernard Shaw] would relieve us from that

44 From the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, quoted in Novak 1984, p. xxii.

45 Given an exceptionally eloquent expression in Klemm 2004.

46 Hornby 2001, p. 218

47 Oxford 1999, p. 1610.

sordid necessity of living for others,” by which he means charity but also paid work: “An individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and their wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him.”⁴⁸ Even the owner of property is not exempt, Wilde continues, because property “involves endless claims upon one, endless attention to business, endless bother.” Think of it. Worker or capitalist or landlord, we are all “slaves” to supplying things for others. Frightful.

In that highly metaphorical and imprecise sense, we are indeed “enslaved,” and to our mutual good. After Hegel, many intellectuals have declared that “capitalism” makes people work for others, and makes the worker therefore an “object,” not a “subject.”⁴⁹ So it was said by Marx and Heidegger and Sartre, since “being for others” is “inauthentic.” If I adopt a social role, such as selling you a deep-fried Mars bar from my fish-and-chips shop in Edinburgh, I am treating you as an object, and you, when you hand over your money, are treating me the same. As the philosopher Roger Scruton put it, to follow such a Kantian obedience to ethical law with respect to others “launches us down that path towards the ‘bourgeois’ order on which finicky intellectuals are so reluctant to tread.”⁵⁰

Or they say things like, “All right, a 3,000% increasing in material goods and services since 1800—but humans do not live by bread alone.” Yes, certainly. If economic growth, as many conservatives and some socialists argue, corrupted the human soul, I would enthusiastically join them in attacking it. What benefit is it to someone who gains the world but loses her immortal soul? But the case for such an outcome, though heard on all sides, is feeble. One is not corrupted by having enough to eat. “Consumerism,” for example, is a common worry. But it has an answer, chiefly that it does not corrupt and is not new and is anyway a worry only for the rich, who are always with us.⁵¹

Or it is said that inequality is worrisome. Or that private monopolies are prevalent, and corrupt the government. Or that the 1980s Me Decade was a bad ‘un. Or, or, or. They all have answers that ought to satisfy a Christian or Jew or Muslim, and did before the theologians and their enemies became immune to the evidence about innovism and its sadly impoverishing opposite in statism. The liberal era was brief, from 1776 to 1848. It established freedom of religion.

But freedom is freedom is freedom. And is “liberty.” A free-willed person should be, in God’s eyes, liberated from human interference in religion and in harmless behavior and in beneficial business. Which is most of it, we liberals say.

48 Wilde 1891 (1930), pp. 257, 270. The next quotation is from p. 259. The editor, Hesketh Pearson, remarks that Wilde had been inspired by Shaw’s lecture, “without bothering himself much about economics” (p. xii). The astoundingly scholarly Wikipedia entry for “wage slavery,” by the way, gives arguments from people like Noam Chomsky against my views, and those by people like Robert Nozick in favor of them.

49 Tucker 2017 on the origin of both right and left statism in Hegel.

50 Scruton 1994, p. 468.

51 McCloskey 2010.

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