

## Nations, Liberalism, and Science

*Peter Augustine Lawler*

What is the relationship between *liberalism* and the *nation*? Does liberalism threaten the very existence of the nation? Can liberalism have a future without the nation, without a definite and limited political form? Do we have to choose between being liberal and being national or political? And how has our changing understanding of the natural world and man's place in it—from natural theology to modern, mechanistic science—changed personhood and politics?

From the beginning, liberalism and political devotion have, of course, been in tension. The nation—or nation-state—is the modern form of the *polis* or political community. The polis came into existence when human loyalty ceased to be wholly personal or despotic. Loyalty shifted away from the personal rule of the despot to the way of life—the system of justice—of the place. Personal loyalty is fundamentally nomadic; it travels with the despot. Political loyalty is to a community occupying a particular territory.

The polis or nation inspires and depends upon political loyalty. The citizen, strictly speaking, finds his identity as a part of a political whole. He is formed by the process of “political socialization” of a particular polis. The citizen exists to serve the cause of his country—a reality much bigger and greater than himself. The virtue of the citizen is loyalty—even unquestioning loyalty.

Liberalism has its origins in opposition to that comprehensive understanding of citizenship. Each particular human being—the person—is not part of a political whole. The person himself *is* a whole, with personal responsibility and a personal destiny. A person can also be a citizen, of course, but being a citizen expresses only part—and not the highest part—of his being. He has the freedom to form or integrate himself according to what he can see for himself about who he is, both in terms of his capabilities and limitations and about what and whom he knows and loves.

### Christian Liberalism

Liberalism begins on a big scale with Christianity. St. Augustine, for instance, criticized the theologies of ancient Greece and Rome from a

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*Peter Augustine Lawler, a New Atlantis contributing editor, is Dana Professor of Government at Berry College and the author, most recently, of Homeless and at Home in America: Evidence for the Dignity of the Human Soul in Our Time and Place (St. Augustine Press, 2007).*

WINTER 2009 ~ 81

liberal view. Civil theology involved the polytheistic gods of Athens and Rome, who existed to give divine sanction to the polis's view of justice and to the loyalty of citizens. This civil theology, Augustine explains, does not give people the security for which they long: the city, so to speak, does not care about you the way you care about the city; there is no political recognition of your unique and irreplaceable being as a particular person.

What's more, Augustine continues, civil theology is degrading. The truth is that every human being is more than a citizen—and we are all free to be open to the truth about who we are.

St. Augustine also criticized the philosophic natural theology of the Greeks and Romans. According to natural theology, we are all part of the impersonal process of nature. Aristotle's God, for example, is not a person but a principle. Our moral pretensions and desire for personal significance are not supported by nature. The natural theologians—philosophers and scientists—are incapable, Augustine claims, of seeing the irreplaceable existence of every particular human being. They cannot account for our desire to be more than merely biological beings—to be personally significant, to be known and loved as persons. Our irreducible personal longings—which exist in every being born with both *logos* and *eros*—point in the direction of a personal God Who knows and loves us as persons. When each of us “relates” to that God, we remain a whole person relating to a whole person.

St. Augustine says that each human being is to some extent a pilgrim in his earthly city, and he obeys the law in the spirit of an alien or captive. Deep down, the particular person does not understand himself as a citizen or think of his country as his truest home. The person is also alienated, to some extent, from nature, knowing that nature is not his truest home either. Although man knows himself as a *who*, to both nature and the polis he is only a *what*.

Not that persons are not partly natural, partly political, partly familial, and so forth, but as a unique whole, a person is more than the sum of his parts. That is not modern liberalism, though. Distinctively modern liberalism is Christian or personal liberalism without belief in the Bible's personal God.

### **Modern Liberalism**

Modern liberal philosophers, such as John Locke, side with the Christians in opposing civil theology. We are by nature free individuals—whole or, in a way, emotionally self-sufficient beings—and we invent political life—we

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institute government—to serve our individual needs. I do not exist for the city; the city exists for me. I ask first what my country can do for me, not what I can do for my country. The modern separation of church and state is an unreligious way of expressing the Christian view that our deepest devotion is not to our country, and that our political obedience can be separated from love or profound emotional loyalty.

The modern liberals also agree with the Christians that natural theology does not provide an account to the individual of his freedom. We are free from nature and dissatisfied with nature. We can and should use our freedom to master nature, to create a world more in accord with our own longings. Modern liberals make use of their technology to counter the impersonality of natural theology. But while each person should regard himself as unique and irreplaceable—as a whole and not merely a part—there is no corresponding personal God Who lovingly provides for each of us. There is no evidence for the existence of such a God, just as there is no evidence that any of us survives our biological demise. The truth is that we are all alone in a hostile environment and must provide for ourselves. This is not to say that Locke was necessarily an atheist; let us say he was a Deist who believed in an emphatically “past-tense” God Who set the universe in motion and left us alone. The God of the Deists may be different from the Aristotelian principle insofar as we can hold Him to be a Creator mysteriously responsible for our freedom, but He, like Aristotle’s God, is not personally concerned with any of us in particular.

Thus the good and bad news for the modern liberal is that each of us is really on his own—truly, absolutely free. The free human person brought into being the impersonal state. To maximize our freedom, we do not think of government as deserving of our personal love or loyalty, and patriotism becomes much less instinctive and more calculating. The free citizen sees that government is part of what is good for him. But the territory or tradition that his political community occupies is much less important than its capacity to serve his personal interests. Except for extreme libertarians, nobody denies that the modern state still requires some measure of loyalty. But the source of loyalty becomes more problematic. As the modern world becomes more “Lockeanized,” loyalty is the virtue that most obviously deteriorates. The “right of secession” is more consciously and deliberately applied to all the relationships that are parts of our lives. Even friendship becomes a temporary alliance, or “networking.”

The modern state has also suffered, since its beginning, from the growing contradiction between liberal personal longings and increasingly impersonal or mechanistic science. The cost of freeing the person from

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nature and God is freeing nature and theology from the person. “Nature’s God” is not a guide for human thought and action, and nature is hostile to our personal beings. The tension between the apparent accident of personal existence and the impersonal laws that govern science produces a loneliness that becomes harder and harder to bear.

### **Modern Civil Theology**

The problems of diminished loyalty and anxious loneliness were addressed by the effort to restore civil theology in the modern world. This effort was inaugurated by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to Rousseau, each human being is by nature an unconscious part of a mechanical natural world, needing nothing more than what nature has given him.

But somehow we, in our freedom, have accidentally moved further and further from nature. The freer we are, the more miserably alienated we become. People living in big modern states are big messes. It may be true that they are wealthy, powerful, and free. But they are neither happy nor admirable because they have no idea who they are or what they are doing. They cannot understand themselves as parts of some whole, but they do not have the wherewithal to become wholes or authentically integrated persons either.

We have to cure ourselves, Rousseau says, of our anxious, displaced disorientation. We have to consciously and deliberately make ourselves into citizens, parts of a political whole. Because we cannot be parts of nature anymore, we have to understand ourselves as parts of a city or nation to be happy again. The state must become a nation, or at least a nation-state.

Thus Rousseau framed modern nationalism, with various romantic and organic features to secure our emotional attachment. Nationalism flourished in the nineteenth century, and Christianity in various countries was largely subordinated to national purposes. Nationalism was the cause of some of the bloodiest wars of the nineteenth century, and behind the horrific First World War. Millions of men were slaughtered who had come to be identified primarily as parts of their nation.

Nationalism was reborn fanatically in Hitler and the Nazis’ sinister political religion. The Nazis went well beyond their historical predecessors in terms of understanding people as merely expendable parts of a national whole. Everyone who is not a German lives and dies for the benefit of Germans. And every German citizen is nothing but cannon

fodder and a reproductive machine for the Fatherland. Even Nazi racist exterminationism can be understood as an aspect of that nationalism.

The world was discredited any impetus there was to restore civil religion in Europe. The very idea of the nation was in some ways abandoned, as were even the remnants of Christian personal theology. Theologies that treat people as either citizens or persons, the thought is, inevitably lead to murder. The only theology that seems to retain credibility is the perfectly impersonal natural theology of pantheism, which supplements the impersonal natural science of homogeneous materialism and is compatible with the “oneness” of deep ecology and human extinctionism.

### **Nature versus History**

Probably the most fanatical attempt to resolve the contradiction between the liberal devotion to the person and impersonal science and theology was History—History with a capital H. History is the name for what free persons have created in opposition to nature, evidence of the real existence of human freedom. One modern goal—perhaps the most deeply modern goal—was for History to reconstruct all of natural reality. Nature would be fully brought under human control. Our personal existences would become completely unalienated and secure.

With the complete triumph of History, as glimpsed by Hegel and fully described by Marx, free persons would no longer be reduced to parts of some larger alien whole. They wouldn't merely be cogs in a machine—as they were under any system of the “division of labor”—or citizens or parents or in the thrall of some otherworldly opiate. They would be free to form themselves into whatever kind of personal reality they pleased. Marx called this perfect personal liberation communism. Human persons would be free from all communal determination for self-determination.

This vision of perfect personal liberation through historical transformation manifested itself in the horribly cruel and murderous Communist totalitarianism of the twentieth century. Communist nations such as the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China set about eradicating the natural elements of human existence. In their aim to strip persons of any real individuality, and their ruthless sacrifice of the imperfect persons of today for the liberated persons of tomorrow, these historical efforts were radically depersonalizing. The twentieth century saw hundreds of millions of expendable persons march to their deaths—beings who were regarded as no more than parts of History.

## Humanitarian Fantasies

Leading European thinkers now believe they have learned the lesson of the world wars and the Cold War: The nation should have no future. Human rights and the dignity of the person both require our gradual surrender of territorial democracy and political loyalty. There should no longer be any attachment to a particular people in a particular place. Nobody should understand himself as a dutiful citizen of a specific political entity, but we should all be *cosmopolitan*—that is, citizens of the world. Power should devolve from the state in the direction of larger unions—toward an amorphous and rather apolitical European Union (which, having no clear territorial identity, is potentially a global union) or to the United Nations. These larger unions might be criticized as diminishing personal significance in the direction of impersonal, meddling, bureaucratic despotism. The most urgent thing, however, is not to empower people to act as citizens but to save them from the destructive consequences of doing so.

Today's sophisticated devotion is the post-national, humanitarian protection of human rights. Every human being, we still say, is unique and irreplaceable. Nobody may be sacrificed for another, or to some cause or ideal, but only because we know of nothing higher than each of our bare existences. We do what we can to protect each person from *not being* and nothing more, because each person is nothing more than the opposite of not being. We must stop sacrificing present persons to some imaginary future—as the Christians did with their vision of personal immortality or the Marxists did with their vision of perfect historical liberation. It would seem that the contemporary enlightened European has reconciled us to the truth that our bodily existence is all there is.

But this enlightened view is full of contradictions and paradoxes. If bodily existence is all there is, why do we privilege human beings over other sorts of bodies? Why is it that we alone among the animals have rights? Perhaps it is because we alone among the animals are aware of the limits of our natural existence, are disgusted by them, and strive to overcome them. Each human person does not really think of himself as just a part of nature, and even today he cannot help but hate the nature bound to ultimately kill him. When he dies, as nature intends for him soon enough, he's gone; the fact that the matter that was an indispensable condition of him—but not simply him—becomes a tree or a dolphin is no consolation. He cannot lose himself in some vision of an impersonal natural process. There is little reason to devote himself to human rights if he is just one part of nature among infinitely many.

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Contemporary Europeans seem to recognize that they are more than their mere bodies, although they do not seem to know who or what. The attempt—in the service of personal wholeness or self-sufficiency—not to be a part of anything at all leads to emptiness and solitary fantasies. The lack of compensation for one's bodily limitations may also lead to an extreme hatred of that body. The contemporary European cannot be a pantheist or even a consistent naturalist; he does not really find himself at home in nature, nor can he find himself at home in his country, his church, or his family. He tends to live, instead, in a sort of postpolitical, postreligious, postfamilial fantasy. He thinks that, and acts like, he can live without the institutions that are reflections of his embodiment—institutions that human beings form as a result of having and coming to terms with their bodies.

The postpolitical fantasy is that the nation can wither away. The wars fought by nations can be replaced by humanitarian police actions aimed at deviant evildoers, often those who haven't yet bought into modern liberalism; the need for militaries and militancy will evaporate; the draft becomes an affront against human dignity and personal freedom. The truth, of course, is that liberalism cannot altogether free human beings from their political needs. New national, despotic, and imperial challenges will inevitably arise; the world will remain dangerous; war will always be a possibility. Witness Europe's incomprehension in the face of the illiberal challenge it is now facing from yet-national Russia.

The protection of human rights may once have seemed to require the enlightened dismissal of the nation. But the Russians, Chinese, and Iranians are serving up a reminder that the nation or some polis is a necessary defense against despotism and empire. Being part of a nation or polis has to be a part—but not the whole—of any free person with a future; rights are effectively exercised only within a political context. Even if the perfected liberation of the cosmopolitan, humanitarian world dreamed up by Marx and many theorists today were a possibility, the price for the absence of alienation would be a chilling human emptiness.

The postfamilial fantasy is reflected most strikingly in birth rates below the rate of replacement, but also in low rates of marriage and the detachment of parenthood from marriage. A free person, conscious that his death ends all, does not think beyond his personal existence; he refuses to subordinate himself to a community of family members who came before or after him, rejecting the illusion that he can live on through his children. But of course, the natural future of our species and the political future of a people depends upon replacements being born and raised. It is

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a perverse mark of our freedom that we are able to suppress the natural instinct meant to keep life going. People are refusing, more than ever, to be the social, species-serving animals of the evolutionary account, to take their place as part of nature. The demographic crisis caused by so many failing to think of themselves as belonging to a family may be the main reason to wonder whether Europe—or excessively consistent, lonely liberalism—could possibly have a future.

For related reasons, Europeans seem also to be living in a postreligious fantasy. Very few go to church or think of themselves as members of a church. Hostile to the various forms of repression caused by their nations' religious past, Europeans generally see religion as little more than a source of injustice and repression, a multifaceted affront to the person and his rights. Just a few decades ago, European intellectuals prided themselves on being full of existentialist anxiety in the absence of God—but the contemporary European claims to be too enlightened to be moved, as a person, toward any kind of illusory transcendence. He refuses either to believe in God or to be haunted by His absence. But the longings that make a person more than a merely biological being remain just beneath the surface. The person remains miserably disoriented in the perceived absence of the personal God.

The preponderance of evidence we have from Europe is that the liberalism of personal liberation has become toxic—if not yet decisively fatal—for human imaginations that have room for nations or political life. The modern oscillation between expecting too much and too little of citizenship can only be brought to an end, it is now thought, by bringing citizenship to an end. Today's modern liberalism—in the absence of the personal significance born of truly belonging to a family, country, or church—might prove so empty that it is incapable of perpetuation.

### **The American Nation and the American Person**

The American nation, we can also see, has a more promising future. There are many reasons for the American difference. The two world wars and the Cold War were not as traumatic for us; in fact, they reinforced our national self-confidence. The human cost of the monstrous twentieth century was not exacted on our continent. In each of these wars we also rightly think of ourselves as having been a force for good, defending personal freedom and human rights against terrible evildoers.

We can also see that America has not really engaged in the effort to stabilize free, personal life in the absence of a personal God. The American

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view has tended neither toward the death of God nor His reconfiguration as the foundation of some American civil religion. Writers often discuss the American civil religion, but generally describe it as some variant of Biblical religion with an active God.

From the beginning, Americans have not grappled in the same way with the contradiction between intense personal longings and impersonal science or theology. Consider our Declaration of Independence. The theoretical core of the Declaration—on self-evident truths, unalienable rights, and instituting government—speaks of “Nature’s God,” a Deist creator, the source of the impersonal laws of nature. Christian members of the Continental Congress insisted that two other references to God be added to the eminently modern Jefferson and Franklin’s draft, and so the rousing conclusion, ending with “sacred Honor,” speaks of a Creator-God as the “Supreme Judge” of us all and as the source of “divine Providence.” Thanks to this legislative compromise, the Declaration offers up a “Nature’s God” Who also knows and cares about each of us. Through most of our history, such compromises between modern and Christian Americans have considerably reduced the distance between Christian and modern views of the person’s natural and theological environment.

So Americans view political life, in part, as the free construction of self-interested individuals securing their material being in a hostile natural world. But they also, in part, regard it as limited by the conscientious duties persons have to their personal Creator. Political life is both dignified and limited by the real existence of dignified creatures. The most admirable and powerful American efforts at egalitarian reform have had religious origins, but religion has also acted (as Tocqueville explained) as a limit on the American spirit of social and political reform. Americans have plenty of confidence in progress, but present persons are not to be sacrificed to some vague historical future. Because Americans don’t really believe people are radically, miserably alienated from God and nature now, they don’t think it is their job to transform existence itself to save people from their misery.

Consider today how Americans are divided over the truth of modern, impersonal natural theology or science. Some Americans believe that we should take our social and moral cues from the evolutionary science of Darwin. In their eyes, we are not qualitatively different from the other animals; basically, they assert with pride in their sophistication, we are chimps with really big brains. This variety of American is also usually quite proud of his autonomy—his freedom from nature for self-determination. If men really *are* the same as chimps, however, then human autonomy

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is nothing but an illusion. Strict materialism and evolution cannot really account for free, personal existence. So these sophisticated Americans, despite themselves, can't help but be in fierce rebellion against impersonal nature. They are well on their way to reducing all morality to fanaticism about personal health and safety. In their social behavior, they increasingly resemble the Europeans—and like the Europeans, they are not having enough children to replace themselves.

Meanwhile, other Americans still believe that their personal existence is supported by a personal God, often a God Whose intelligence exhibits itself in the design of nature. Although they typically believe their true home is somewhere else, these are clearly the Americans most at home as members of families, churches, and their country. Generally speaking, they have more than enough babies to replace themselves, raise them comparatively well, and do not seek as urgently to fend off their inevitable biological demise. Most at home with the irreducible alienation that comes with being a person, they seem best able to see the good about their familial and political existence for what it is. In our country, personal theology seems an indispensable support for the future of the nation.

The scientific truth of evolution does not explain who we are as personal beings. The truth about who we are—true liberalism—may well be unsustainable if the contradiction between our personal freedom and the impersonal truth about God and nature is too extreme. But perhaps the modern dualism between nature and personal freedom is, in truth, too extreme. There may well be a ground for *who* we are in nature itself. After all, as far as we can tell, only a human person, a being with *logos* and *eros* and will, could possibly be open to the truth about nature—or about being, including human being. Being a political being—part of a polis or nation—is part of the truth, though not the whole or the highest truth, about being who we are.