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Modernity and Our American Heresies

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America, some of its critics say, has less grounding in tradition than any other nation in history. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger said that the United States and the Soviet Union were metaphysically indistinguishable in their technological orientation, in their understanding of nature as nothing but resources to be exploited. The Canadian philosopher George Grant, influenced by Heidegger, claimed that the United States has wholly given itself over to technology, defining human purpose as nothing more than the acquisition of power. All genuinely political life—and all philosophy, theology, and other forms of contemplation—have disappeared from America. For these not-entirely-friendly foreign critics, the United States is the country mostly wholly in the thrall of the technological "how" at the expense of any reflection on the "why" of humanly worthy purposes.

If, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn claimed, it is characteristic of the modern West to have "ceased to see the purpose" that should be the foundation of human life, it is perhaps in America that the lonely and demoralizing consequences of modern emptiness are most advanced. Beneath our therapeutic happy-talk and technologically optimistic pragmatism, a critic like Solzhenitsyn can hear the howl of existentialism. Americans have "nothing"—nothing but inarticulate anxiety—with which to resist the "something"—the measurable effects—of technological progress.

Fortunately, we have technological remedies for our anxiety. There are, of course, those of the pharmacological variety. But there are also the diversions of the screen—from the smartphone to the laptop, from social media to video games to Internet porn. The complacently honest libertarian Tyler Cowen points to the dark side of our hyper-meritocratic future, where those individuals not clever and competent enough to succeed will

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lead marginally productive lives, contented by screen-based entertainment and other cheap high-tech diversions made by those at the top. But neither class, in this vision of the future, will include many who will be distinguished by the heart-enlarging traditional virtues of generosity or charity.

The genuinely countercultural philosopher-comedian Louis C.K. denies his daughters smartphones so that they might not find an easy way out of the anxious sadness that overwhelms us all from time to time for no good reason. We are more and more satisfied with the predictable, minimalist emotion that comes from being diverted from both one's own solitary emptiness—one's misery without God or without the communal and intimate attachments of a rich relational life—and from the empathy that comes from closeness to others.

The wasteland of emptiness grows in America, most of all, because of our lack of a culture or tradition to keep it in check. Certainly there never was a pre-modern America. Americans have no experience of living in close-knit communities like the medieval village or the classical *polis* that Alasdair MacIntyre finds indispensable for human flourishing. Although the agrarian localist Wendell Berry sometimes writes about the unsettling of America, he has also written that America—the country or project—was *born* unsettled: the Europeans were already modern when they moved to the New World and imposed their liberated will upon the indigenous people.

It is characteristically American not to be able to resist progress, even in order to preserve the way of life—the manners, morals, and virtues—of a particular place. From its foundation, America has existed, in MacIntyre's memorable phrase, "after virtue." It is, as Carey McWilliams put it, a "technological republic" in which republican virtue is replaced by the enlightened management of self-interest. McWilliams argued that it was the philosopher John Locke who provided enlightened Americans with the "educational technology" that was "the mirror of the framers' political principles." To be a Lockean American is to be distrustful of authority and attachment and "driven by the desire for freedom and mastery." For these critics, Locke's theory of the inventive conquest of nature for human convenience *is* America. Maybe more precisely: It is America's theory, and it increasingly becomes American practice. What we *say*—especially if we have the Lockean opinion that words are basically weapons that we use to achieve our practical or technical goals—cannot help but transform what we *do*. Much of the history of America has been defined by our inability to limit Locke's individualistic and technological understanding of who

each of us is. That is why, for Heidegger, America represented the way "the wasteland grows" in our technological era.

The wasteland grows, ironically, on the basis of Locke's technological understanding of what waste is. Prior to the invention of *money*, according to Locke, wastefulness meant picking more apples than you can eat before they spoil. The injunction not to waste was nothing more or less than a sensible recognition of a natural limit on effective human labor; it kept people from sweating for no good reason, for picking for the sake of picking. But after the invention of money, no apples picked need spoil; they could be traded for little pieces of yellow metal that don't spoil. Given the Lockean technology-friendly view that just about all real "value" comes from human labor—from improving upon what we are given by nature—"thou shalt not waste" comes to mean that any uncultivated land is wasted. All of nature is to be treated as a resource to be technologically transformed for our convenience. In light of that technological imperative not to waste, it is ironic that the wasteland grows. As America's critics would put it, everything we are given is degraded or despoiled by the infinite imperatives of our material needs. *Nothing* in America exists "according to nature" anymore. And *everything*—as our traditionalist critics argue (following Marx)—has a cash value. But what Marx views in positive ways—he admires the ardor with which capitalism mobilized human labor to overcome natural scarcity—critics like MacIntyre and Heidegger view negatively. They believe, after all, that nature gives us more than fearful misery and the freedom to do something about it; nature, properly understood, is the source of the purposes that make life worth living. For these critics of the American technological way of life, the fundamental fact is not natural scarcity but natural order, and our truthful understanding of what that order is is embedded in traditions and customs of particular places that are laid waste by promiscuous technological innovation.

Technological Virtues

So critics such as Heidegger, MacIntyre, and Grant see that American liberalism is really a kind of technological nihilism. It is freedom *for* nothing in particular beyond power and control. Sometimes they turn to Alexis de Tocqueville to remind us that this nihilism is really a feature of American democracy, though Tocqueville is really not quite so pessimistic as they are. Tocqueville explains that the Americans practice the Cartesian method without having ever read a word of Descartes. That modern method, the foundation of the technological view of the world, is *doubt*. All

I really know is that *I am*, and so the only point of life—the only use of my freedom—is to keep me from not not-being for as long as possible. The only kind of science that survives methodical doubt is that which improves the comfort and security of particular individuals, of me. The proud desire to know for its own sake is less worthwhile because it is unproductive.

The Cartesian method *is* the democratic method, which is why the modern Americans could have discovered it without reading Descartes. It is all about doubting personal authority. If I defer to your word, then I let you rule me. That is true of all personal authority—from princes to priests to parents and even or especially the personal God. Nobody *is* better than me, and so nobody *knows* better than me. I methodically doubt my way to that democratic opinion. I have no reason to privilege anyone's opinion over my own.

Of course, this Cartesian position of doubt is not quite the nihilism that America's critics decry. But it does pose some problems for our democracy. According to this Cartesian-democratic doubt, nobody is better than me, but I am no better than anyone else. So I have no personal content—no point of view by which to privilege my opinion over the opinions of others. As Tocqueville observes, I especially have no point of view by which to resist public opinion, which appears to be determined by no one in particular. It is undemocratic to defer to some person, but it seems perfectly democratic, in a way, for all persons to defer equally to some impersonal force. That goes not only for public opinion, but for other impersonal forces such as "History," and of course "technology." I know I'm not nothing, but I lack what it takes, all by myself, to fill myself up with something. And so I'm carried along by impersonal forces I have no right to resist, especially if, as in the case of technology, the impersonal forces aim to keep me, as a person, around as long as possible.

Technology is both impersonal, insofar as it cannot distinguish one person from other, and highly personal, insofar as it is about sustaining the lives of people by controlling the impersonal nature that would otherwise be a constant threat to us. But seeing personal life as nothing other than gaining the power and control necessary to sustain life against an indifferent and hostile nature is what leads to America's technological and democratic nihilism. It is nihilistic because it empties personal life of the relational context—which includes dogmatic personal authority—in which it can find real content, a point of view, or spirit of resistance. That's the way it makes good sense to say American democracy is, in principle, "after virtue." The democrat does not know who he is (beyond not not-being) or what he is supposed to do.

If there is any kind of American virtue, it is nothing more than being as attentive as possible to health and safety. The traditional virtues of chastity and gentlemanliness, with all their complex demands governing and shaping the relationships between the sexes, are replaced with the much simpler virtue of "safe sex"—which means not only sensibly avoiding the infectious diseases that might cut short our lives, but also avoiding the babies that might cut short our lives as free individuals, unfettered by relationships with noisy little dependents. But while sex has become much simpler, the worries we have about avoiding "risk factors" have been multiplying every day, as scientists tell us more and more about how everything from cheeseburgers to spending too much time in the sun (or too little!) could threaten our health and even end up killing us years down the road. At least in principle, most Americans are likely sympathetic to the transhumanist dream of a world in which all the risk factors have gone away, in which all sex is safe, and in which we would not have to be concerned with generating replacements because no one would need to be replaced.

The emotional result of the American's interpersonal isolation is what Tocqueville named individualism, the indifference that flows from the mistaken judgment that love and hate are more trouble than they're worth. If you want to see a display of contemporary American individualism, watch a rerun of *Seinfeld* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or even the Charlie Sheen version of *Two and a Half Men*. Healthy men have hearts so contracted that they don't have what it takes emotionally (they're fine physically) to reproduce. We also recognize American men and women described as emptied of content by democratic or anti-relational doubt in Allan Bloom's classic *The Closing of the American Mind*. Those "flat souled" or erotically lame sophisticated Americans are unmoved by either love or death; they are nothing more, it seems, than technological beings: clever and competent, specialists and survivalists.

Religion to the Rescue

If all these gloomy ideas about the sorry state of our souls in America sound almost too bad to be true, that's because that is just what they are. For Tocqueville, the worst evils of individualism and technological obsessiveness were more of an inherent possibility for America than a description of how Americans really lived. Americans combat individualism through various heart-enlarging activities, the most important among them being religion. Tocqueville was astonished by the way Americans exempted their religious faith from their habitual doubt. Today much more than in

Tocqueville's time Americans are actually less individualistic—less selfishly withdrawn and more concerned about their responsibility to their country and their fellow creatures—than Europeans, and the reason for this is the nation's exceptional religiosity. It is Americans' religion that gets their minds off themselves and points them in the direction of personal, relational duties. It is their religious authorities—their preachers and ministers and rabbis and priests—who persuade them that the truth is more than technological, that they were born to contemplate both who God is and their own singular personal destinies as beings with souls. It is this religious knowledge and cultivation that give Americans the confidence to think and act freely, to rule themselves and others as free and relational beings.

But, our traditionalist critics respond, we should look at the reality of American religion, and not Tocqueville's idealized version of it. Well, most of it has been Christian—that is, various forms of Christian heresy. Consider the ridiculous and tyrannical Puritans who wanted to turn every sin into a crime; the hyper-enthusiastic and at times semi-illiterate evangelicals; the incomprehensible tongue-speaking Pentecostals and holiness snake-handlers; and the Mormons, that uniquely American Christian heresy that even has another whole book of Scripture. Meanwhile, our mainstream Protestants have made—from the beginning—too many compromises with modern individualism to have served effectively as counterweights to both the extremes of self-expressive pantheism and unhinged enthusiasm that have characterized our beliefs. What about the more orthodox and traditional religion of our immigrants—such as the Catholics and Jews? Traditionalists can complain that America has changed Catholicism a lot more than Catholicism has changed America. And the practicing Orthodox Jews say the same thing about most American Jews.

These heretical deviations from religious tradition and orthodoxy are hardly new in America. As Tocqueville observed, the Americans—having rejected the intellectual and emotional resources of tradition and deference to personal authority—find it hard to think and act reasonably about God and the soul. The Americans are characterized less by reason than by will, and so they are full of exaggerations: at one moment vainly overestimating the significance of who they are and what they do, and in another paralyzed by the perception of the puny insignificance of any particular being.

Capitalist Christianity

Even when we admit that American religion is full of heresies, we have to remember heresies aren't all bad. They often highlight something that has

been neglected by orthodox tradition. When I watch a low-church movie starring Robert Duvall—*Tender Mercies* or *The Apostle*—I know that I'm seeing a truthful portrayal of Christian truth, if far from the whole truth. The murderer-on-the-run preacher in *The Apostle* who founds a church where class and status make no difference, a congregation of displaced misfits who are poor and poorer, dumb and dumber, black and white, male and female, fat and fatter still, is telling people who need to hear (because they can't read) what they most need to know to turn their lives around: They can be saved, despite it all, if they believe in Jesus and "Holy Ghost power." There is something exceptional about a country that carries the truth about amazing grace in its popular culture and its country music.

Traditionalists often exaggerate what a technological wasteland America is by denying that evangelicals and Pentecostals are really Christian. Sure, no other country is plagued so much by warehouse churches, touchy-feely platitudes posing as theology, and the soul-challenged music that's called Christian contemporary. But none of those criticisms get to the question of whether the evangelicals really believe or whether they really practice the virtues—beginning with charity—that flow from love of the personal God. Where would America be without the exceptional fact of their belief? Certainly there has to be room for that free, egalitarian, and virtuous belief—and the whole Christ-haunted South—in an account of who we are as a nation.

American Protestantism is not simply or even mainly the individualistic negation of relational life. Marx said that for Americans, even religion is just another whimsical private preference like any other commodity, and is a sign of our alienation from community. Americans "church shop," and lots of them switch churches as often as they switch cars. American Protestant ministers are often paid what amounts to a percentage of the Sunday collection. So they have every incentive to be consumer-sensitive, and one result is all the techno-amenities that we can find in our mega-churches. Economists might say that the reason religion flourishes in America is that government does nothing to sustain it, and so our preachers and churches are wonderfully entrepreneurial. The idea of selecting the religion that's "right for you" the same way we shop around for the right car is, of course, ridiculous, and in a country that is full of conflicting theological views, individuals choosing between them can't help but wonder if any of them could really be true.

This Marxist understanding of American religion—in which Americans turn to church to free themselves from the competitive rigors of the dog-eat-dog world of capitalism, only to find their churches destabilized as much

as any other American institution by the logic of the market—is, of course, distorted by the "historicist" conviction that the success of capitalism had authoritatively and permanently discredited every "spiritual" claim for truth. We find a similar kind of distortion in Bloom's conviction that modern theory had transformed every feature of American practice, just as we find it in Grant's or Heidegger's conviction that to be American is to regard nature and other persons as nothing more than resources to be exploited.

Many American preachers—certainly most of those we see on TV—have to some extent confused being entrepreneurial with being evangelical. It is also true, however, that the best way to be a successful religion entrepreneur is to be evangelical—to be all about the good news that we all have a friend in the Jesus who sees and loves us just as we are. American Christianity is relatively anti-institutional and surely seems to pit emotion against reason, the heart against the head, the "Biblical worldview" against "the secular, rationalist worldview." Tocqueville, by describing the characteristically American religious form of the revivalist camp meeting, called attention to its excessive displacement and its overreliance on raw enthusiasm. But he also saw it as evidence that the soul has and will always have needs that can be denied or distorted but not eradicated. And he compared the enthusiasm of the Americans to that of the original Christians in reaction against Roman Epicureanism. It is a reaction against the technological and political project to make each of us totally at home in this world. The good news is that the pedestrian claim that middle-class Americans have reasonably organized their lives according to the principles of self-interest is contradicted by the wondrous love that animates American faith.

Building Better Than They Knew

Not only are heresies not all bad, but American heresies have had the tendency to balance each other out. America's first and most wonderful and effective theological balancing act was our Declaration of Independence, the greatness of which lies in its compromise between the Deistic (or Lockean) and the more Calvinist (or residually Puritan) members of the Continental Congress. Congress amended Thomas Jefferson's more Deistic draft, "mangling" it, in Jefferson's own opinion, but actually improving it. A key compromise was between the unrelational, past-tense God of nature (held by the modern philosophers, including especially John Locke) and the personal, judgmental, providential Creator (held by the Puritans). By reconciling the God of nature with the God of the Bible, our Declaration can be called a kind of accidental Thomism—an accidental affirmation of

the personal natural law of St. Thomas Aquinas. That result was intended by neither the Calvinist nor Lockean parties to the compromise.

Our Declaration suggests that we are free and relational beings by nature—natural persons, without referring at all, of course, to Biblical revelation. Our natural longings as free persons point toward a certain kind of Creator, and we know who we are in that respect even if we do not have particular knowledge of or faith in who that God is. Our "transcendence" is not merely our Cartesian or Lockean freedom from nature for self-determination. Nor is our transcendence merely the elitist, selfish, and fundamentally amoral "freedom of the mind," that philosophers, including Jefferson in private letters, claim. We are free from political determination for, as Madison wrote, doing our conscientious duties to our Creator—duties that even Madison did not sufficiently recognize are not lonely and inward but social and relational. For us, freedom of religion, properly understood, is freedom for churches, for personal authority embodied in "organized religion."

The greatest American Catholic political thinker, Orestes Brownson, claimed that our written Constitution (and, of course, our Declaration) depended on our "providential constitution," on the intellectual and cultural resources that shaped the American people. Brownson also claimed that our Founders, as statesmen, took into account what Americans had been given when building our political institutions, which is why their particular political accomplishment is better than their abstract or Lockean political theory—why they built "better than they knew," in the phrase that Catholic thinker John Courtney Murray popularized.

The lucid dogma of equality that distinguished our Declaration seems to have more than one source, and its emergence from various forms of Christian heresy allowed its insistent and truthful claim for the unique and irreplaceable dignity of every free and equal human person to be preserved in the form of a compromise. By being really very personal, the truth the Declaration teaches about "all men" reconciles "particularity" with "universality." As Tocqueville explains, the difference between the egalitarian universalism of Christianity and that of, say pantheism, or Buddhism or Darwinism, is that only Christianity preserves the truth about the person from absorption by the homogeneous forces that surround him or her.

Puritan Contributions

The thing that might have amazed Tocqueville the most about our country is the determination that every person be educated to exercise his

freedom. No person exists by nature to be dominated by another, and slavery is contrary to the truth about who each of us is. That truth should not be hidden from anyone, because nobody should be suckered by lies—either, the Puritans emphasize, the lies of Satanic deceivers who distort what the Bible says in the service of their own pride, or, the Lockeans emphasize, aristocrats who vainly try to persuade us that the point of your life is to be of service to me. From our Lockean Deists, we get the truth that every human being has interests. Nobody is above and nobody is below being a being with interests. We are all free beings who work, we are free to work, and we are stuck with working. The result, Tocqueville observed, is universal literacy and universal technical education. But that Lockean view comes at the expense of the cultivation of the soul, which is dismissed as a waste of valuable time. That is why when our libertarians criticize our colleges today, it is for charging so much money for all kinds of nonsense—such as philosophy and theology—that just won't help you get a job.

The Puritans, as the neo-Puritanical novelist Marilynne Robinson explains, are a key source of our devotion to liberal education, to education for civilization. From them we get the idea that education can be for the sake of more than mere work or productivity. Every person has a soul, and so everyone should be able to read what the Bible says about one's personal destiny and charitable, moral responsibilities for oneself. Most of our best colleges have had a religious inspiration, and they suffer in the most important respects when they lose confidence in what they can do for souls. Robinson calls attention to the neo-Puritanical Oberlin in the 1830s. That college offered everyone—including blacks and women—a liberal education and insisted that everyone on campus, including professors, both do manual labor and have time for leisurely study. (To see how Oberlin has changed, watch the brilliant HBO series *Girls*, which is about a graduate of that school who is absolutely clueless about who she is as a person made to love, work, and know. She has no idea what she is supposed to do, and college did not help her out at all.)

Of course, sophisticated Americans have always resisted the Puritanical correction to their enlightened individualism. One reason that this correction is indispensable is that the devotion to individual rights, by itself, does not justify the personal sacrifice required to achieve egalitarian political reform. The philosophical and theoretical language about the equality of man was indispensable, but it was the neo-Puritanical abolitionists who produced the relentless egalitarian agitation that made the Civil War inevitable. The Civil Rights movement would likewise not have succeeded without the social reformism based on a kind of residually Puritanical or

Biblical conception of citizenship, one that did not shrink from the sacrifice of one's own blood for justice.

Then there is the American Puritanical personal morality so criticized by the rest of the highly civilized world. When a European says "The trouble with Americans such as you is that you're too Puritanical," your response should be: "I'm Puritanical and proud of it. You should be too. Look at you!" The typical European criticism of Americans is actually that they are both Puritanical repressive moralists and Lockean workaholic capitalists. The proper response: There is nothing wrong with that. It is civilized to be moral and both necessary and fulfilling to be productive. We are the people who know how to balance love and work. About much of the Old World and its seemingly decayed-beyond-repair Christianity, Americans can say there is both a shortage of work and a shortage of love. Thanks to our observant Christians, we can add, the birth dearth—the demographic crisis that threatens the very future of free government and "Western culture" in Europe—is a very manageable problem in America.

Tocqueville notices, of course, the virtues of chastity and marital fidelity being on display in America like they had never been before. And even today, we can say that Americans, because of their Christianity, take those virtues more seriously than people in many other developed countries. To be Puritanical, remember, is to be concerned with the souls of your fellow citizens and fellow human beings. It is easy to overdo that concern, as we Americans did with the piece of Puritanical fanaticism called Prohibition. But don't forget that the opposite of excessively intrusive concern is the yawn of indifference, which could hardly be a virtue. A Puritanical residue Tocqueville praises in America was Sunday closing laws, which gave everyone a leisurely respite from the busyness of commerce to focus through sermons and reading on one's own singular immortal destiny, on one's own soul and its relational needs and duties.

Lockean Contributions

I have probably overdone my praise of the Puritans, and so to restore the balance that is our Declaration, I will go on to explain some of the ways in which our country has benefited from the Deism of John Locke—starting with a few words about what Deism is.

Lockean Deists speak of God, but in the past tense. He's on a permanent vacation. He's not actively engaged in our lives. God made us free or somewhat unnatural persons who have to institute government

to free ourselves from our fearful discontent with our natural existence. The teaching of the source of our freedom is that you are on your own to escape from nature to secure our inalienable rights. We must provide for ourselves because neither God—the author of each of our beings—or nature cares about any of us in particular.

Locke and Jefferson view us all as free persons, and as simply a part of nature. The mystery of the personal identity each of us experiences makes room in Locke for belief in a real Creator, and it certainly is a personal refutation of those self-forgetting thinkers who claim that all is necessity. "Nature's God," the phrase used in the Declaration, is not the God of Aristotle, who is not a person but a principle, not a Who but a what, like a giant magnet.

The mystery of Christianity, rejected by most philosophers and scientists, is personal, relational monotheism. The most aggressive part of Locke's heresy is the rejection of that mystery—the mystery of the Trinity. For Locke, God is personal, but not relational, just as we are personal, but not deep down relational. God, like each of us, is finally on his own.

Locke's personal, Christian heresy is actually more mysterious than the doctrine of the Trinity. How can God be both personal and not relational and loving? How can each of us be personal but not relational and loving? Can such a lonely and isolated personal identity really be possible? We can say for certain that Locke separates "personal" from "relational" in order to make it clear enough that personal identity and security is the bottom line, the point of all being. Locke, remember, is most justly famous for mocking out of existence the hyper-relational traditional arguments for tyranny, such as Filmer's divine right of kings, which portrayed us as all one big family under the personal paternalistic monarch ruling in God's image.

The shared personal focus explains why American Lockeans and more orthodox Christians have allied against every modern effort to reduce particular persons to expendable parts of some civic, natural, or Historical whole. It led the Americans to defeat every form of progressive ideology that would sacrifice real persons living today for some vague perfect tomorrow—for some historically created paradise right here on earth. It is that personal focus—whether found in orthodox believers or feminist autonomy fanatics—that has kept Americans from really believing for a moment that Darwin teaches the whole truth about who we are.

We also see the influence of this Lockean and Christian understanding in the determination of James Madison that religion in America not be reduced to a civil theology—to degrading lies about our divine

significance as a nation of beings who are citizens and nothing more. Our Constitution is silent on God precisely because it presupposes the person's freedom from political domination to discover his conscientious duties to his Creator. The separation of church and state only makes sense in terms of the Christian understanding of who each of us is. That is why the Italian theorist and politician Marcello Pera, for one, is wrong to say that a kind of "cultural" Christianity can be Europe's civil theology. If what the Christians teach about the person is true, then civil theology is a degrading lie. If it is not true, then there is no barrier to the state using religion as vehicle of popular control.

We can say that the relative impersonality of the modern state is a radical improvement, on a Christian foundation, over the ancient polis and personal monarchies. The authority of the king is different in kind from that of the personal God. The relatively impersonal authority of the state is circumscribed by the more personal and relational authority of religion as an organized community of thought and action. It goes without saying that a pure Lockean cannot do justice to the purpose of the church in addressing our deepest longings as social and relational persons. But, thanks to our Puritanism or Calvinism, our Lockeanism has not been that pure.

Technology and Our Homelessness

The American, then, will not be martyred by civil or ecclesiastical authorities for either refusing to swear allegiance to the state or refusing to swear allegiance to Christ the King. American Christians can be dutifully loyal to both state and church, because neither claims competence over the sphere of the other. Americans resist both political domination of religion and religious domination of politics.

Even the progress of science—liberated in a technological direction by the modern emphasis on serving the needs of the free person—has really been progress from a Christian view. It is surely Christian to demand that science, politics, and economics have to be justified through the elevation of ordinary lives.

Modern science is also a revelation of who we are as free beings—although not, of course, a complete revelation. Modern science overemphasizes our "homelessness"—our personal contingency—in a sometimes heroic effort to make this world a better home for us. It, of course, fails to abolish our homelessness, because it cannot address its deepest cause. Nonetheless, there is something Christian in acknowledging our inability to be fully at home in either nature or "the city." We are right to be

concerned that the personal obsessions that fuel the transhumanist aspirations of modern science will come at the cost of living well as relational beings; that is yet another reason why our Deistic heresy has to be balanced by our Puritanical one.

Our admirable friendly critic Solzhenitsyn, remember, called modern technology—with its dislocating effects on, for example, the relations between the generations—another trial of free will. There is no reason not to believe that technological progress can be guided by the one true progress that can occur in each personal life. As Walker Percy noted, technology can make us more alive than ever to the truth that this life is a pilgrimage—rooted in existential dislocation—for each of us.

Is Balance Sustainable?

Today, the balance of heresies that is the genius of our Declaration is threatened. On such issues as abortion, gay rights, and entitlements, our courts and bureaucracies are making decisions without deferring to the legislatures that are better equipped to strike the appropriate balance. The clash of reasons that produces democratic compromise can chasten the autonomy freaks and elevate some Christians from their fundamentalism, making it possible to balance free personal identity with the imperatives of relationality. But legislative compromise has been too largely displaced by the high principle that animates judges and bureaucrats.

Our courts seem to understand the word liberty to be nothing more than a weapon to be used by each generation of Americans to expand the realm of individual autonomy over time. That means that purely Lockean theory is to trump what we know through science—especially through Darwin and his successors—about who we are as social animals. It trumps, in other words, realistic compromise by relational persons oriented by God and nature toward the truth about who we are.

In recent decades our judges, liberal elites, and bureaucrats have claimed that their judicial decisions are more "final" than they conceivably can be. Their efforts to stifle civic and political deliberation might produce a kind of coherence, but almost never a genuinely decisive and enduring result. The most obvious example here is abortion, where *Roe v. Wade* has not settled the constitutional or moral issue for Americans but has made real discussion of the issue—and the compromise of reasonable contending claims—all but impossible.

It is too easy to claim that our "culture wars" are between dogmatic secularists and dogmatic Christians. My friendlier interpretation is that they

are mainly between two forms of Christian heresy: Lockean and Protestant Trinitarian. These two heretical forms—working together—have produced a country in which almost everyone "thinks personally" now. But it is also easy to see that thinking too personally can come at the expense of the relational context in which persons can think clearly, act confidently, find status or significance, find both love and duties, and be happy.

As our Founders discovered in the compromise of the Declaration, understanding God to be both personal and relational, as well as both the God of nature and the God of the Bible, comes closer to the whole truth about who we are than the understanding that governed either party to the compromise. Privileging legislative compromise over high principle need not be at the expense of the truth. It is just a realistic recognition that American heresies or American factions all come short of capturing the whole truth about who we are as persons "hardwired," so to speak, to be free and relational, willing and loving, and open to the truth.