

Religion, Reason, and the Free Society

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This article seeks to outline some criteria by which we can consider whether a given religion is likely to *support* the growth and development of free societies in which unjust coercion is minimized. This article does not suggest that religion is or is not generally compatible with the free society. Rather, I say “support” because to support is to provide a foundation. To be a passive bystander is something rather different. These criteria are: (1) a religion’s understanding of the Divinity; (2) its view of reason and free choice; and (3) its conception of the state, especially the state’s constitutionalism—the arrangements which impose limits on the exercise of power and guarantee basic freedoms.

Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to state that one orthodoxy among many modern liberals is that religion—specifically, those religions that embody decidedly nonrelativistic claims about the nature of God (or gods), man, morality, and society—is to be viewed with suspicion. John Rawls, for example, made a point of stating that the entire “content and tone” of his idea of justice was “influenced” by “dwelling upon” the “endless oppressions and cruelties of state power and inquisition used to sustain Christian unity beginning as early as Saint Augustine and extending into the eighteenth century.”¹ Such narratives hold that the monotheistic religions, particularly Christianity, were the great problem to which liberalism was the solution.

Among the premises of this type of liberalism is one or more of the following, sometimes-unspoken claims:

1. Religion and reason are generally incompatible.
2. Religion is essentially a historical avatar which, in the interests of a peaceful transition to the better world that will be revealed to us by the modern social and empirical sciences, must be accorded some token respect until it disappears.
3. Liberty essentially concerns each individual's satisfaction of their desires, understood in an Epicurean way. This implies that we must dramatically limit the private and public influence of any religion that suggests that authentic freedom involves one's free conformity to moral truths that are knowable by reason and receive confirmation from what a religion regards as a revelation from the Divinity.

Each of these claims is open to significant objections. Some religions take reason very seriously, for example, whether in the form of natural theology, or in their confidence that natural reason is capable of knowing moral truth and therefore able to discern how to do good and avoid evil.

The question, however, is whether religion can serve as a foundation for free societies. The answer can be expressed in two words: "It depends." Among the matters upon which it depends are (1) what we mean by *religion*, (2) what we mean by *free society*, (3) which religion we have in mind, and (4) how a religion views reason.

This article does not suggest that religion is or is not generally compatible with the free society. Rather, it seeks to outline some criteria by which we can consider whether a given religion is likely to *support* the growth and development of free societies in which unjust coercion is minimized. I say "support" because to support is to provide a foundation. To be a passive (even a harmless) bystander is something rather different. These criteria, which are by no means exhaustive, are:

1. a religion's understanding of the Divinity;
2. a religion's view of reason and free choice; and
3. a religion's conception of the state, especially its view of constitutionalism, understood not simply as a power-map but as arrangements which impose limits on the exercise of power and guarantee basic freedoms.²

What Is Religion?

Before considering these matters, we need to define *religion*.³ One starting point is to ask what distinguishes religious convictions from, for example, philosophical and political beliefs. Contrary to what is often proposed, the difference is not to be found in the contrast between religion (or faith) and reason. Such a distinction often assumes that religious faith is by definition irrational. But the fact that something cannot be completely explained by unaided human reason does not mean that it does not exist or that it is untrue.

One can further argue that if the existence of the universe and the laws of nature is derived from and depends upon the creative intelligence of an uncaused Creator, rather than being derived from a divine watchmaker or nothingness, it is not contrary to nor beyond reason to expect that human history might well include communications from that intelligent Creator or uncaused First Cause to created rational beings—communications that themselves may go beyond or even be contrary to the laws of nature.⁴

If the religion-reason contrast fails, perhaps religion may be best understood as a cultural matter. In one sense, this is appropriate insofar as all religions contain and are a source of ways of acting, practices, protocols, institutions, and the employment of symbols. They almost all embrace a collective memory. Within some religions (especially those with strong tribal or folk dimensions), many of their adherents may even regard such things as more important than the religion's actual beliefs and doctrines.

Yet most religions clearly make demands upon their adherents that go beyond those of a club, university, political party, or any number of cultural associations. Religions understand themselves to be *more* than just groups of like-minded people doing similar things and engaging in particular practices over a period of time. In the case of most religions, all these rituals, customs, and expectations are derivative of something different and more fundamental than, for instance, a shared appreciation for art or a consciousness of common ethnic bonds.

This becomes apparent when we ask ourselves what makes religion different from all other cultural formations. In the end, it might be suggested, religion and religious belief are best defined in terms of one's search for and conclusions concerning *the truth about the transcendent*. In the ancient world, the word *religion* broadly meant reverence for the gods, respect for what is sacred, or the bond between humans and the gods. In other writings, penned by figures ranging from pagans such as Cicero to Christians such as Augustine, such reverence, respect, and bonds are clearly understood as implying living one's life in accordance with knowledge of the truth about such things. In this sense, religion is *directly*

concerned with the truth about the divine (including the question of whether or not there is a divinity) and the meaning of that truth for human choice and action in a way that, for instance, political beliefs, ideological convictions, and nonreligious forms of human organization are not.

Particular political or ideological convictions may imply, reflect, or demand commitment to a specific religious position. Marxism, for instance, was explicitly committed to materialism and atheism. National Socialism was not shy about promoting a type of paganism. But political philosophies such as liberalism, socialism, and conservatism are not *immediately* concerned with attempting to know and then express the truth about the transcendent in the ways that atheism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism most certainly are.

This conception of religion does not require the mind's assent to any specific religious claim. An atheist is one who has presumably thought about and found unconvincing any religion's claims to embody a divine revelation as well as the arguments for the existence of a Divinity which have been and continue to be made on the basis of reason unaided by revelation. But what the atheist or agnostic *can* share with the believer is understanding the *point* of (1) considering whether there is some ultimate source of good and meaning, (2) using my reason to discern the truth of this question, and (3) then seeking to order my choices and actions on the basis of my judgments about this matter. What is at stake is knowledge of the truth and my ability to arrange my life on the basis of the truth, consistent with other people's liberty to do likewise and the demands of public morality and order.⁵

Who Is God?

If religion is essentially concerned with the truth about the transcendent, then some questions that arise immediately are “who is/are this transcendent being/s” and “what is its/their nature?” In public debate throughout the West, there is a tendency to treat all religions as the same, to regard all religious traditions as infinitely adaptable sociological and cultural phenomena, and to view their respective religious authorities as akin to temporal politicians. In many such cases, the result is to ignore one of the most important forces at work in a given religion: its understanding of the Divinity. This matters, because a religion's relationship with a free society will be affected by whether its dominant theological tradition (as opposed to outlier versions) understands the divine as embodying particular characteristics such as *Logos* (Divine Reason) or *Voluntas* (Divine Will).

Christianity—at least its orthodox expressions—considers itself, for example, to be presenting a public revelation in the sense of a communication from the

Divine to humans that has unfolded over time and in the form of specific historical events, the facts of which were witnessed, recorded, and consequently presented to others for their free assent. Christianity regards this divinity as a rational being (“In the beginning was the *λόγος*” [*Logos*] [John 1:1]) from which human reason is ultimately derived. It follows that this *Logos* is a Being about which human reason can understand a great deal, even independent from a specific revelation, as a matter of natural theology.

Some religions have less regard for reason or simply say little about it. In some religions, God is understood primarily as a *Voluntas* who operates above or beyond reason. The ancient pagan religions, for example, presented the deities as willful, capricious beings who meddled in human affairs for the sake of their own hedonistic amusement rather than any rational concern for the well-being of mortal creatures. Christians even used the word “pagan” (from the Latin *pagus*, meaning country-area rural dweller) to convey the idea that pagans were “country-bumpkins” inasmuch as their adherence to pre-Christian religious beliefs was seen as characteristic of a close-minded parochialism and reflecting an irrational comprehension of the Divine, humanity, and the universe as a whole.

The importance of such matters goes beyond intellectual speculation. For how we understand God’s nature has implications for whether we can judge particular human choices and actions to be unreasonable. If it is the case that a given religion (1) understands God as an essentially reasonable being, (2) views this rational Divinity as lying at the beginning of the universe as the ultimate source of causality, (3) regards this God as having endowed man with the light of reason, and (4) holds that human reason thus lends itself to knowledge of this Divinity, then such a God will presumably expect that religion’s adherents also to act *reasonably*, that is, in a nonarbitrary manner. A commitment to reasonableness and nonarbitrary behavior is central to key institutions of a free society, most notably rule of law and constitutionally limited government. On the other hand, if reason is simply not part of a religion’s conception of the Divinity’s nature, then that Divinity can command his followers to make unreasonable choices. That does not augur well for respect for the reasonableness that is central to the principles and operations of liberal constitutional order.

Or, to take another angle, a religion’s ability to support something like economic freedom will depend on whether it regards the Divinity as a creative Being who acts with purpose and who, as part of realizing that purpose, has subsequently endowed man with creative powers with which to unfold the fullness of an original creative act. This is the original meaning of the word *secularization*.

The word *secular* was first coined by Latin Christians to embrace the notion of that which is not divine but which involves man’s growing comprehension

of and control over aspects of the world once relatively inaccessible to human science and technology. Many religions, such as orthodox versions of Judaism and Christianity, actually encourage “secularization” of this kind, by insisting on God’s transcendence and the intelligibility of creation. This facilitates inquiry of the type associated with the natural sciences and thus encourages technological development.⁶ As Great Britain’s former Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, writes, “one of the revolutions of biblical thought was to demythologise . . . nature. For the first time, people could see the condition of the world not as something given, sacrosanct and wrapped in mystery, but as something that could be rationally understood and improved upon.”⁷ By contrast, the pagan religions did not view humans as “co-creators” working to unfold a still-unfinished creation in human history. This is one reason why the Greeks and Romans, unlike the Jews, viewed manual work and commerce (as opposed to politics and war) as the responsibility of slaves, women, and other noncitizens.

Religion, Reason, and Fideism

This discussion of how a religion understands the nature of the Divinity points to a second important criterion when considering whether a given religion can serve as a foundation of free societies. This concerns its view of reason and free choice. By reason, I do not simply mean instrumental reason—that is, that which allows us to understand *how* to do X. Rather, I mean a more expansive view of reason in the sense of the mind’s ability to identify sound reasons *why* we should choose X as a reasonable and good course of action and *why* we should identify Y as an unreasonable course of action.

As mentioned, some religions have a “high” view of reason. The first Christian philosophers and theologians, for instance, understood the significance of Jesus of Nazareth’s vigorous reaffirmation of the Decalogue and the insistence in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* that human reason allowed people to know the same truths of morality without direct reference to Revelation. As early as the second century, early Christian scholars were identifying the commands of the Decalogue as precepts of natural law which God gave humans as intrinsic to their nature: precepts worthy of men made *free*, and common to all—*naturalia et liberalia et communia omnium*, as Irenaeus wrote.⁸ Theophilus of Antioch similarly maintained that to obey the law of God is to live according to nature.⁹

Over the centuries, Christian theologians have applied natural-law reasoning to many subjects: international relations; the nature of money and capital; the origins and limits of government; questions of war and peace; the workings of contract, prices, and exchange; issues of authority and sovereignty; the right of

resistance to tyranny; the workings of equity in the legal system; the nature and limits of positive law; and categories of justice. It was also Christian thinkers who first formulated the mature concept of human rights.¹⁰ And they did so by asking what self-evident first principles told us about what each human being reasonably owes to every other human being. For free societies, such inquiry was important, partly because it helped shaped many of their key economic, political, and legal institutions, but also because without reason, it is hard to identify and discuss what constitutes *arbitrary* actions by the state.

A strong attention and commitment to reason is also important because, absent such a commitment, there is a strong risk that a religion will remain or become fideistic or lapse into fideism—the idea that religious faith is somehow independent of reason, and/or that faith and reason are somehow inherently hostile to each other, and/or that faith and religious precepts and their implementation do not require explanation to either believers in the faith or those who do not believe in that religion. Hence, one cannot reason with the fideist who denies that violence in the name of religion is unreasonable. This is one of the key points underscored by Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 Regensburg Address.¹¹

The flipside to fideism is a type of religious sentimentalism. Equally uninterested in robust accounts of reason, this can result in religious believers who have adopted such an outlook contributing to public discourse by evoking emotions and strongly felt feelings instead of rational arguments. To the extent that this contributes to irrational discourse in a given society, sentimentalism corrodes reasoned reflection about subjects ranging from freedom to the limits of the state.

Religion, Reason, and Free Choice

A religion's conception of reason also plays a central role in a given faith's understanding of the *will*. This includes whether or not an adherent of that faith believes the will is actually free, or whether we are simply subject to some type of determinism, be it Karl Marx's hard determinism or John Stuart Mill's soft determinism. And if determinism is true, it is unclear why people should care about freedom or the preservation of a free society.

Outside of orthodox Judaism and orthodox Christianity, it is hard to find robust accounts of free will in the world's religions. Indeed, the prophets of Israel seem to have reached a mature and clear understanding of the universe's origins and its natural intelligibility centuries before Greek philosophers did so. This achievement seems to have been an accomplishment of natural reason reflecting on experienced realities and what Jews and Christians believe to be the

openness of that people's prophets to divine communication through the various modes called revelation.¹²

A lengthy version of this argument was articulated by the French philosopher and theologian Claude Tresmontant in his critique of the Spinozist description of the prophecies of Israel as works of imagination rather than intelligence.¹³ Speaking of the Hebrew Scriptures, Tresmontant maintains:

Here we have an intellectual revolution, a liberation, an act of free thought, a rejection of myth, an effort to use reason, undoubtedly the most important that the human race has known in all its history. On the day when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees, when he ceased to worship the moon and stars, to sacrifice to the idols of his fathers, and when he started for a country which he knew not, called by a God who is not identified with any visible thing, he brought about the greatest, and at the same time the most hidden, of revolutions . . . the most decisive for the human race. When the prophets of Israel bitterly rebuke pagan idolatry, they are doing something strictly *rational*. When they refuse to sacrifice human children to idols or to myths, they carry their work of the use of reason into practical human conduct.¹⁴

Judaism's second and related achievement, underscored by Tresmontant, was its stress on human *freedom*. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the mistakes and errors made by humans are not the result of selfish manipulations of humans by the fickle deities of Greek and Roman mythology.

Nor did Judaism see human events as a question of fate, another theme which characterized the pagan religions of East and West. In Greek mythology, for instance, the destiny of every individual was the result of a thread spun, measured, and cut by the three Fates—Atropos, Clotho, and Lachesis—who themselves (revealingly) are daughters of the god of Darkness, Erebus, and the goddess of night, Nyx.

For Tresmontant, the vision of humans presented in the Hebrew Scriptures could not be more different. Events are most definitely *not* beyond human control. "The doctrine of freedom," Tresmontant writes, "is taught throughout the Old Testament. We always find that the God of Israel respects the created freedom which he appeals to, anxiously and earnestly, but which he never forces."¹⁵ God does not, for instance, choose the Fall. Man is banished from paradise because the man and the woman made a free choice to disobey God.

This theme of free will is pervasive throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. As a distinct community but also as families and individuals, the Hebrews are constantly being offered choices: to choose freely, for example, between entering and not entering into a Covenant with God, or to choose freely between good and evil.

Such ideas are powerfully summarized in the Book of Ecclesiasticus, written by the Jewish scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem, sometime between 200 and 175 BC. Fatalism—the belief that all events are predetermined and thus inevitable—is explicitly rejected: “Do not say, ‘Because of the Lord I left the right way’; for he will not do what he hates. Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray’; for he had no need of a sinful man” (Eccl. 15:11–12). This poetic rebuff of fatalism is followed by a powerful affirmation of the reality of free will and free choice:

It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him. (Eccl. 15:11–12)

These words make it clear that nothing else is settling what is actually done, except your free choice. Along with this rigorous insistence on the reality of free will goes an emphasis on *personal responsibility*. If I am the one who makes the choice, I must accept whatever comes with that choice and not blame others for my mistakes.

So what might this mean for the free society? In the case of religions that have a high view of reason and free choice, they are arguably: (1) more inclined to support institutions and conditions that seek to limit unjust coercion and provide space in the political, economic, and social spheres for the exercise of reason and free choice; and (2) capable of correction when their adherents act in ways that suggest that this crucial point has become obscured. Deterministic versions of faith (or deterministic philosophies, for that matter), by contrast, have no particular reason to prioritize the establishment, growth, and protection of such institutions and conditions insofar as they regard free will as an illusion and provide weak accounts of reason.

Religion, the State, and Constitutionalism

A third important criterion by which a religion’s capacity to support and maintain a free society may be assessed concerns its view of one particular institution that has long occupied the thinking of those who support a free civilization: the state.

Jesus of Nazareth’s words recorded in the gospel of Luke, “render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar—and to God what belongs to God” (Luke 20:25), were literally revolutionary in their implications for how most people, including many non-Jews and non-Christians, subsequently understood the state. With good reason, the Gospel of Luke relates that Christ’s “answer took [his ques-

tioners] by surprise” (Luke 20:26). For, as observed by the nineteenth-century English historian Lord Acton, “in religion, morality, and politics, there was only one legislator and one authority” in the pre-Christian ancient world: the *pólis* (πόλις) and later the Roman state.¹⁶ Separation of the temporal and spiritual was incomprehensible to pagan minds because a distinction between the temporal and spiritual did not exist in the pre-Christian world. As the social philosopher Rodger Charles, SJ, noted:

in saying that God had to be given his due as well as Caesar, [Jesus of Nazareth] asserted the independence of the spiritual authority from the political in all matters of the spirit, of faith, worship and morals. This was a new departure in the world’s experience of religion. In the pagan world, the State had controlled religion in all its aspects. The kingdom of God that Christ had announced was spiritual, but it was to have independence as a social organization so that the things of God could be given at least equal seriousness to those of Caesar. . . . When events led to conflict with the State on this issue, and the Christians faced martyrdom, the political effects in theory and in practice did much to determine the shape of European political culture and through it that of the modern world.¹⁷

Throughout the Greco-Romano world, the widespread ascription of divine characteristics to the *pólis* and the Roman state was often paid lip service. Recognizing the strength of Jewish resentment concerning the token emperor-worship required of all the empire’s subjects, the imperial authorities generally exempted Jews from such acts. Yet there were times when the pagan inability to distinguish between religion and the state caused immense difficulty for people in the ancient world. People were not, for instance, able to appeal to a divine law that transcended the *pólis*.

By universalizing the Jewish belief that those exercising legal authority were as subject to Yahweh’s law as everyone else, Christianity achieved the hitherto unthinkable: the state’s desacralization. Christianity was respectful of the Roman state’s authority. The writings of Paul and Peter, for instance, underline the divine origin of the state’s authority.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Judaism and Christianity insisted that Caesar is not a god and may not behave as if he were a god. Jews and Christians would pray *for* earthly rulers. It was, however, anathema for Jews and Christians to pray *to* such rulers. While Jews and Christians regarded the state as the custodian of social order, they did not consider the state itself to be the ultimate source of truth and law.¹⁹

Thus, as Joseph Ratzinger puts it, Jews and Christians viewed the state as an order that found its limits in a faith that worshiped not the state, but a God who

stood over the state and judged it.²⁰ When Constantine gave religious liberty to the Christian Church in his Edict of Milan (313 AD), he did not subject Christianity to himself. Instead Constantine effectively declared that Caesar was no longer god.²¹

This set the stage for ongoing clashes between the state and religious believers and organizations across the globe that persist until today. Certainly, there have been instances throughout the centuries when, for example, Christian churches and ecclesial communities have associated themselves with the exercise of temporal power to varying degrees, precisely because they paid insufficient attention to the distinctions between the temporal and spiritual orders that Christian Revelation itself suggests and, when pondered, elucidates. Yet, despite these cases, the vital distinction between the claims of God and Caesar, with its implicit limiting of state power, has persisted in Christian religious belief and actions, even in those instances where state authorities effectively assumed headship of the church.

At the heart of many such conflicts has been the issue of the religious freedom of individuals and organizations *vis-à-vis* the state. This embraces questions such as the legitimacy of religious belief as a foundation for activity in the public square, blasphemy laws, religious tests for public office, religious education in private and public settings, and state-funding of religious activities. It need hardly be said that denial of religious liberty has resulted in the systematic and sporadic coercion of millions by governments over the centuries, the worst in sheer numbers being that inflicted by Communist regimes throughout the twentieth century.

There are many ways in which this distinction between the temporal and spiritual (or ecclesiastical) realms has been expressed throughout history. Among others, these include a high degree of integration (e.g., the Orthodox Church in Russia under the czars), soft establishmentarianism (today's Church of England), and concordat models (which exist in some Catholic-majority nations).

Another way in which this distinction is expressed has been through what might be called "nonconfessionalism." By this, I mean a state of affairs in which government refrains from according formal legal recognition to any one religious position and genuinely seeks to treat members of all religious groups, including nonbelievers and agnostics, fairly. In these nations, there is no established religion or religious tests for public office. The exercise of religious liberty is not restricted to interior belief or questions of prayer and worship. Nor is religious liberty regarded as a mandate for the state to free people "from" religion.

Nonconfessionalism seeks to guarantee the freedom of all religious communities and nonbelievers within a free society, consistent with the liberties of others and the legitimate demands of public order.

Nonconfessionalism is not to be understood as "doctrinaire secularism." Unlike doctrinaire secularism, nonconfessionalism does not demand that anyone

contributing, for example, to political discussion *must* act as if there is no God, or if there is, this *ought* to have no bearing whatsoever upon their choices and actions in this arena.²² Nor does nonconfessionalism mean that governments are somehow obliged to deny a nation's religious heritage. To pretend, for example, that Islam has not exerted tremendous influence upon Arab and Turkish history and culture is as ahistorical as trying to deny the influence of Orthodoxy in Russia, Hinduism in India, Lutheranism in Finland, Shinto in Japan, or Buddhism in Thailand. Nonconfessionalism is not about the unofficial obliteration of the religious dimension of national and cultural memory by the state in the name of liberty or neutrality.

None of these approaches will in themselves resolve all conflicts between religious liberty and the demands of the state. The point, however, is that to the extent that a religion (1) embodies or is capable of generating this type of distinction between the temporal and the spiritual, and (2) favors and even facilitates the development of a constitutional order that expresses such a distinction, it helps to limit the state's ability to intervene in a particularly important sphere of freedom. For, if the state can regularly and consistently infringe on one's legitimate religious freedoms, it will have little difficulty promoting unjust coercion in all other spheres of life.

What, however, happens if a religion does not embody a strong distinction between the temporal and the spiritual? Or, if a religion understands itself as subsuming *holus-bolus* the state? Or, if there is no meaningful distinction between religious authority and the state authority? Or, if a religion's theology does not allow for the development of constitutional orders that prioritize and protect religious liberty and other freedoms?

This, many argue, is one of the major challenges facing the Islamic world, and one that those Muslims who want to see the emergence of free societies in majority-Islamic nations are acutely aware of. In his book *Islamic Theology, Constitutionalism, and the State*, the Swiss philosopher and historian Lukas Wick argues that if constitutional order and rule of law are to emerge and last, they require a certain view of human beings and reality, which will in turn reflect certain religious positions or a certain type of background religious culture. Wick maintains that Christianity helped develop and give form to constitutionalism because of (1) its grounding in metaphysical realism, (2) its insistence of the natural integrity of the world, (3) its emphasis upon the freedom of man, and (4) its affirmation of natural law.

The success of this movement throughout much of the West facilitated the growth of constitutionalism in other parts of the world—including, as underscored by the British-Lebanese historian of the Arab world, Albert Hourani, its Muslim

portion.²³ Wick points out, however, that these constitutions in Muslim nations do not seem to have prevented significant slippages in freedom, especially religious freedom, in the vast majority of such countries. Most have lapsed into some form of despotism, either in the name of Islamism²⁴ or by figures often identified in the West as “secular.” The question thus arises of why constitutionalism has not been able to root itself more firmly in these countries.

Wick seeks to answer this question by taking Islamic theology (of which, he notes, there are many schools and traditions) seriously. He does not make the all-too-common mistake of reading Islam through a Christian or secular lens. Wick considers, for instance, what theology in Islam actually means, and illustrates that Islam’s understanding of theology is very different to that of Christianity. Consequently, Wick argues, Islam does not invite reflective thought in theology because its epistemological outlook is constrained by Islam’s notion that knowledge is restricted to revelation. Thus, Islamic theology immediately devolves into jurisprudence, understood as the examination and immediate application of divine rules to political, social, legal, and economic life.

Even more important is that part of Muslim revelation that runs counter to the Jewish and Christian doctrine that man is made in God’s image and likeness. Without this likeness, man has no theological grounds for being understood as a “co-creator,” or as one who exercises “sovereignty,” in the sense of freedom and free choice as understood by the Hebrew Prophets, Paul, and Aquinas. In the absence of such image-bearing characteristics, such powers are God’s alone. Moreover, Wick adds, there is no such thing as “natural man” in Islam insofar as Islamic theology traditionally considers all people to be born Muslim. And if there is no natural man—or natural law—then such a doctrine, Wick maintains, undermines the very concept of natural rights which is central to the Western project of constitutionalism.²⁵

In the sixth and last chapter of his book, Wick analyzes the writings of important Muslim thinkers who have taught in established and recognized Sunni Muslim educational settings. These range across the theological spectrum, from outright Islamists to those of other persuasions. Wick’s aim is to discern whether any one of them is friendlier than the others to the notion of constitutional order.

While their overall positions are hardly uniform, Wick concludes that none of these thinkers have a favorable view of constitutionalism. The difficulty, Wick states, is that each of them holds that Islamic Revelation (which they interpret in different ways) is the only source of legitimacy. This means that, *theologically speaking*, they cannot engage the ideas and thinkers (i.e., Greek, Roman, Enlightenment, and Christian thinkers ranging from Pericles to Cicero, Aquinas,

and Montesquieu) that, historically speaking, have given rise to constitutionalism.²⁶ To do otherwise would be to cease to be Muslim in a fundamental way.

Here it is worth noting the following observation of the Iranian philosopher Abdulkarim Soroush: “You need some philosophical underpinning, even theological underpinning in order to have a real democratic system. Your God cannot be a despotic God anymore. A despotic God would not be compatible with a democratic rule, with the idea of rights. So you even have to change your idea of God.”²⁷

There is presently little evidence to suggest that such fundamental change is anywhere on the horizon where it counts in the Muslim world. After all, for a religion to change its conception of God or the gods in any significant way means effectively becoming a new religion. Wick does not rule out the eventual development of genuine constitutionalism within Islam. But he does provide a powerful account of the formidable obstacles to be transcended if this is going to happen and warns against facile comparisons with developments in other religions. As Robert R. Reilly comments, “One might wish this were otherwise, but hope that is not founded upon a grasp of the realities that are laid out here will be misplaced.”²⁸

Conclusion

None of the preceding analysis is to suggest that people who belong to a particular faith necessarily know, understand, or even agree with all its precepts concerning the nature of the Divinity, its view of reason and free will, and its conception of the relationship between the religious and civil realms. Many do not. It is also true that, despite identifying with a given religion, many consistently, even consciously make choices that directly contradict many of its key precepts.²⁹

It follows that membership in a given religion does not necessarily ensure that one will either support or work against the free society. Nor does it guarantee that one will believe that one’s faith tends to support or tends to corrode a free society. Throughout history, there are many who have acted *against* what their faith tells them about the nature and demands of freedom—for better and for worse.

If, however, we want to establish whether or not a given religion is—in principle—likely to be favorably disposed to supporting the free society, we must be willing to take the theological claims of that faith seriously. In short, we must study such things as they are rather than what we may wish them to be. This also means avoiding the temptation of trying to comprehend such things in a mono-causal way, as mainstream Marxists did when they viewed religion as simply a

superstructure that reflected existing economic conditions and priorities and that would fade away once their version of the end of history ensued. Such analyses may reveal some interesting insights, but at the cost of a severely distorted and inaccurate vision of the whole.

A person may, or may not, believe in the truth-claims of a given religion. But for the purposes of answering the question posed by this article, this is not important. What matters is consideration of whether these truth-claims are likely to result in a religion and its adherents contributing to, or corroding, or simply being passive in the face of, the development of a free civilization. Only then can we pass from wishful thinking into reality.

Notes

1. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xxv–xxviii.
2. See Eric Barendt, *An Introduction to Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–2.
3. This section draws on and develops ideas expressed in Samuel Gregg, *Religious Liberty, The Modern State, and Secularism: Principles and Practice* (Berlin: Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 2013).
4. This argument is expressed at length in John Finnis, “Religion and State,” in idem, *The Collected Essays of John Finnis*, vol. 5, *Religion and Public Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 80–84. See also Anthony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 74–158.
5. On this point, see Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 131–36; and Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* (December 7, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.
6. See John Finnis, “Secularism’s Practical Meaning,” in idem, *Collected Essays*, 5:56–57.
7. Jonathon Sacks, *Morals and Markets* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1998), 16.
8. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* (circa 180–199): 4.16.5.
9. See Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolyucus* (circa 181), 2.16–17.

10. See, for example, Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
11. See Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason, and the University,” September 12, 2006, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.
12. This and the three following paragraphs follow closely the argument of John Finnis, “Body, Soul and Information: On Anscombe’s ‘Royal Road’ to True Belief,” 5th Annual Anscombe Memorial Lecture, St. John’s College, Oxford, October 21, 2014. Copy of text on file with author.
13. See Claude Tresmontant, *Le problème de la Révélation* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), 99–114.
14. See Claude Tresmontant, *Les origines de la philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: A. Fayard Évreux, impr. Hérissey, 1962), 20–21.
15. Tresmontant, *Les origines*, 33.
16. Lord Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Boston: Crossroad, 1948), 45.
17. Rodger Charles, SJ, *Christian Social Witness and Teaching*, vol. 1, *From Biblical Times to the Late Nineteenth Century* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 36.
18. See, for instance, Romans 13:1–6 and 1 Peter 2:13–17.
19. Joseph Ratzinger, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 59.
20. Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 240.
21. The preceding two paragraphs draw upon Samuel Gregg, “Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government,” in *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy*, ed. Philip Booth (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2007), 250–69.
22. These are not religiously neutral positions. Both are derivatives of two of the three variants of atheism specified by Plato: (1) there is no God; or no God with any concern with human choice and action; or (2) any such divine concern with the human is easily appeased by a piety that is at best cosmetic and requires no thoroughgoing rejection of human vices. See *Laws* X 885b, 888c, 901d, 902e–903a, 908b–d, 909a–b.
23. See especially Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), parts 4 and 5.

24. By “Islamism” or “Islamist,” I follow the definition offered by Emin Poljarevic, “Islamism.” In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online (accessed April 10, 2018), <http://0-www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.mylibrary.qu.edu.qa/article/opr/t342/e0252>. “The term ‘Islamism’ at the very least represents a form of social and political activism, grounded in an idea that public and political life should be guided by a set of Islamic principles. In other words, Islamists are those who believe that Islam has an important role to play in organizing a Muslim-majority society and who seek to implement this belief.” According to the French historian of philosophy Remi Brague, “there is no true dividing line between Islam and Islamism. It is a matter of degree, not of kind.” Remi Brague, “With Courage But Without Hatred,” *First Things* 20 July 2016, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/07/with-courage-but-without-hatred>.
25. See Lukas Wick, *Islamic Theology, Constitutionalism, and the State* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2012), and the “Foreword” by Robert R. Reilly.
26. See Wick, *Islamic Theology*, 131–76.
27. Cited in Robert R. Reilly, “The Formidable Philosophical Obstacles to Islamic Constitutionalism,” *Library of Law & Liberty*, February 1, 2013, <http://www.libertylawsite.org/liberty-forum/the-formidable-philosophical-obstacles-to-islamic-constitutional-ism/>.
28. Robert R. Reilly, “Foreword,” in Wick, *Islamic Theology*, iii.
29. Judaism and Christianity hold that everyone makes such choices, which they call sin, at some point of their lives.