





# TAMING THE GODS

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*RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY  
ON THREE CONTINENTS*

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*Introduction*

**ONE**

Full Tents and Empty Cathedrals

**TWO**

Oriental Wisdom

**THREE**

Enlightenment Values

*Notes*



The fact that religion is back is more newsworthy in Europe than in the United States, where religion was never supposed to have been away. But even in the United States, for about half a century between the 1920s and the 1970s, organized religion had not been a major political force. It was always there, especially outside the urban areas, as a social phenomenon. And it impinged on politics. John F. Kennedy, not an especially pious man, had to reassure the voters that he would never take orders from the Vatican. It would have been impossible for a candidate who openly professed disbelief to become president of the United States, and it still is. But Jimmy Carter's compulsion to spread the good news of his born-again faith was something of an anomaly. He was a political liberal, however, who never allowed religious authority to interfere with his politics. Since then, the influence of evangelical Christianity in the political arena has grown, mainly but not exclusively as a right-wing, social conservative force.

Especially during the eight years of George W. Bush's administration, it was a commonplace in Europe to contrast the secular nature of the Old World to the religiosity of the United States. When the ideological positions that had hitched Western Europe and the United States together during the cold war became redundant after 1989, people began to sense a growing rift between the two continents, though a schism had occurred in Western civilization. Forgetting just how recently the authority of established churches had been diminished even in the most liberal European countries, Europeans talked as though secularism had always distinguished them from the parochial, conservative, God-fearing Americans. It was an understandable perception, because even as the church lost most of its clout in Europe, the faithful gained more political power in the United States, at least in the Republican Party.

It is by no means a sure thing, however, that Christianity will not stage a comeback in Europe or retain its influence on politics in the United States. Even if the old established Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe do not manage to climb back to their former pinnacles of authority in social, cultural, and political affairs, it would be hard to say with certainty that evangelical movements will not appeal to Europeans, as they so evidently do to citizens on every other continent, including Asia. Perhaps it is true that prosperity makes people less eager to be reborn in the bosom of Christ, but what is to say that Europeans will always be as rich as they are now? And the increasing wealth of the south of the United States does not seem to have diminished the appetite for religion among some of its richer denizens, including at least two former presidents.

Radical secularists often assume that any organized faith poses a threat to liberal democracy. In cases where religious authority assumes political authority, this threat is real. Democratic politics are a matter of resolving conflicting interests through negotiation and compromise. A religious institution claiming to represent absolute or divine truth cannot make these necessary compromises without the danger of corrupting its own principles, never mind political ones. This is why devout Christians, mainly Protestants, in Europe as well as the United States were often the first to advocate the separation between church and state—to protect the integrity of their faith.

Although it would be absurd to claim that organized religion is incompatible with liberal democracy, tensions between religious and secular authority remain. My book is an attempt to sort out, in different cultures, how democracies have been affected, for better or worse, by these tensions. I do not assume to cover all religions, in all countries. That would be an impossible task. I have concentrated on Western Europe and the United States, as well as the two countries in Asia that I know best, Japan and China. One of my main guides in this venture is a great European thinker who

wrote a classic about the United States of America, and even had interesting things to say about Islam. Alexis de Tocqueville. In his view, democracy in the United States could be established *because* Americans shared a Christian faith, specifically a Protestant faith, whose free agents observed clear boundaries between their churches and the democratic state. Tocqueville was worried, for good reason, that matters in Europe were not quite so simple. There, particularly in Catholic nations, religious claims were often seen as a barrier to democratic rule.

My book consists of three parts, one on church and state relations in Europe and the United States, one on religious authority in China and Japan, and one on the challenges of Islam in contemporary Europe. The thread that runs through these inquiries, despite their wide diversity in space and time, is the question posed by Tocqueville: what is needed, apart from freedom of speech and the right to vote, to hold democratic societies together? Is the rule of law enough, or do we need common values, ethical mores? And what is the role of religion in all this; is it a help or a hindrance to liberal democracy?

What Tocqueville could never have foreseen was the rise of Islam as a major factor in European politics. Even though, statistically, pious Muslims only constitute a small minority of European citizens, Islam is a close rival to Christianity in some areas as the largest organized religion. Exactly what this means in terms of social or political authority is hard to measure, since unlike Roman Catholicism or established Protestant denominations, there is no Muslim Church, with a comparable hierarchy of priests. It would be difficult for most Muslims to establish a common program; their cultures, backgrounds, interests, and beliefs are too diverse, which is one reason why there are, as yet, no Muslim political parties in Europe. But still, practicing Muslims, including the majority of law-abiding believers who have no truck with any violent political ideology, are posing a challenge to the secular certainties gained by Europeans in the last thirty years or so.

Europeans—and perhaps to a lesser extent Americans—are afraid of the consequences. Populist warnings of being “out-bred” or “swamped” by Muslims are finding a receptive audience. Some writers, caught up in (and helping stir up) this mood of anxiety, speak of “Eurabia,” as though Europe is too weak or unwilling to defend its own civilization, were in danger of becoming “Islamized” by people who not only are more than willing to fight for their beliefs, but are producing many more children, at a much faster rate, than “we” are. The assumption here is that even if this were true, which is by no means sure, the grandchildren of the current breeders will be a carbon copy, in terms of culture and religion, of the current generation. An unlikely prospect.

It is not always easy to distinguish fear of an alien faith, a faith moreover with which Christendom has been at war in the past, from fear of aliens *tout court*. To some Europeans it doesn't matter whether a Muslim believes in the Prophet, let alone whether he is a holy warrior, for he or she is a dark-skinned foreigner, and that is quite threatening enough. Some people fear that our very civilization is at stake when “their” customs, which may or may not have a religious background, clash with our present notions of how decent citizens should behave. This is why former liberals, who once prided themselves on their vigilance against racism, sometimes see eye to eye with cultural conservatives in their opposition to Islam. For Islam, as they see it, with its antiquated ideas of homosexuality, or the role of women, threatens to overthrow the very gains that progressives fought for in the last century. Hence the hysteria over women wearing body-covering burkas, even in countries where the number of such women is minimal.

No doubt some Muslims do hold views that fall short of contemporary secular norms. The same goes for some Jews, and some Christians, not to mention pockets of cultures frozen in time, such as the Amish or the American Mennonites. The reason people find Muslims especially frightening is their relative number in concentrated areas of European cities and the fusion, sometimes real, sometimes imagined, between these customary views and violent political ideologies. The brutality

radical political Islam has already left its bloody tracks in several European countries. But it is all too common to simply assume that the bearded man in ankle-length trousers or the woman in a black *hijab* is hiding an assassin's knife or a ticking bomb.

Relations between church and state, or religious and secular authority, cannot be explained in terms of abstractions. They can only be understood in the context of history. Since it is my intention to try and make sense of the world we live in, rather than to write a polemic, history, and thinkers in history, will form a large part of my account.

Because European countries have different histories, in terms of church-state relations and social behavior, societies grapple with the large presence of Muslims in different ways. Britain favors a social form of *laissez-faire*. People are entitled to stick to their own ways, as long as they abide by the law. British liberals, perhaps haunted by colonial guilt, have sometimes gone further and positively encouraged people to conserve their traditions, since any pressure to conform to British custom would smack of imperialist arrogance. Guilt, in this case, hides a peculiar irony, for this type of “multiculturalism,” much hated by conservatives, actually reflects the way much of the British Empire was governed, by dividing colonial subjects into communal groups, and ruling through their leaders. This, in turn, is in line with British traditions: religion, even the established Anglican Church, is seen in cultural more than theological terms. To be an Anglican does not demand belief so much as conformity to certain national customs. Why deny similar cultural allegiances to someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin?

The Dutch, too, used to think of faith in terms of multiculturalism, long before that word was known. Each to his or her own, Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. In the Netherlands this idea used to be applied to all aspects of life: a Catholic went to Catholic schools, Catholic football clubs, Catholic universities, Catholic social clubs. Catholics married Catholics, voted for Catholic political parties, listened to Catholic radio stations, and retired on the proceeds of Catholic pension funds. The same was true of the many Protestant denominations. And liberals and socialists had their own separate worlds as well. At the top of the social and political system, paternalistic representatives of the various “pillars” would work out a consensus on national policies, usually behind closed doors. The “pillar system” was more or less invented in the nineteenth century to stop believers from going for one another's throats. It made democracy work.

Since the French Revolution was in part a rebellion against the authority of the Catholic Church, the French republic is ideologically committed to secularism in a way the British and the Dutch are not. Public places, such as state schools, cannot allow religious symbols to challenge their secular nature. And the republican idea of the *citoyen*, equal before the law, an individual component of the general will, does not allow for a view that makes communal distinctions. Multiculturalism is anathema to the ideology of the French republic. Many people fear that the smallest concession to religious expression in the public or political sphere might revive the power of the hated priests.

Even if relations with Muslims are less fraught in the United States, the questions of church and state are hardly resolved. The rift between those who believe that the United States always was and always should remain a Christian (or Judeo-Christian) nation, and those who agree with Thomas Jefferson that the state is neutral and religion a wholly private affair, still runs deep. This is complicated by the fact that conservative American Christians, like their European counterparts, sometimes feel more akin to conservative Muslims than to secular liberals, whose wickedness, in the eyes of the believers, is the main threat to decent society.

It is often assumed that the vexing problem of religious dogmatism in politics is strictly due to monotheistic traditions. Only believers in one God become violently intolerant of other beliefs. Anocracy is something more commonly associated with Christian or Muslim faiths, based as they are

on bookish dogmas, than with Hinduism, Taoism, or Buddhism.

The truth, as usual, is more complicated. Although believers in one God (except for the Jews) have a greater desire to spread their faith universally—since their God is a universal and not a tribal or local one—the problem of church and state, how to separate political from religious authority, can be just as acute in polytheistic countries. The Tibetan tradition, and the position of the Dalai Lama in contemporary politics, is an example that comes to mind. But it is not the only one. I will examine the examples of China and Japan in some detail to show how the politics of belief have been dealt with there, and how religious faith may have helped or hindered the development of Asian democratic institutions.

This is not unrelated to problems in the West. First of all, as relative power shifts to the East, politics in Asia will have an increasing impact on life elsewhere. But more important in terms of intellectual history, China in particular has often been held up as a mirror (highly distorted, to be sure) to the West by Western thinkers disenchanted by conditions at home. Voltaire, among others, assumed that China's political system, based on secular Confucian ethics, was more rational, that is, less encumbered by religious authority, and thus superior to the way France was ruled. Similar assumptions were made in the Maoist years, even as China was in the murderous grip of a quasi-religious insanity.

The paradox here is that both China and Japan have been idealized in the West, not only for the supposed rationalism of Confucian politics but also for the superior spirituality of their religious traditions: Zen, Taoism, and the like.

Parts of the Confucian world—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—are now ruled by democratical elected governments. Vietnam and China are not. My attempt to take a closer look at the role played by religious institutions in these developments is not just meant as a way to delve into East Asian history, fascinating though it is, but also as a way to gain further insights into the tangled relationship between religious faith and secular politics. Are certain faiths more conducive to democratic politics than others? Does monotheism indeed contain greater ideological dangers than more flexible beliefs?

Not having had either the benefits—or miseries—of a religious upbringing (we belonged to the “liberal pillar”), I cannot write as a partisan of any faith. Nor do I have a special preference for polytheism over monotheism, even though I can see the wisdom of hedging one's bets by backing more than one god. I am not a militant atheist but duck behind the safe screen of agnosticism when challenged. I am persuaded of one thing, however: I do not think religious faith, the desire for metaphysical answers to questions that cannot be rationally answered, the need for and delight in mystical ritual and spiritual speculation, will go away. Nor am I persuaded that they should.

Attempts to crush organized faith with force have rarely resulted in peace, let alone democracy. On the contrary, they caused violent religious rebellions or produced political cults no less murderous than the worst religious violence. Since the subject of this essay is religion and democracy, I have left such quasi-religious political movements as Nazism and Stalinism aside. But they show clearly what happens when the state claims to be the source of absolute truth. Such claims, when backed with force, are always lethal, whether they are enforced by commissars or by priests.

Religion is not a rational enterprise. Its metaphysical claims cannot be proven; either one believes them or one does not. When reflecting on the problems of religion and democracy, the main issue is how to stop irrational passions from turning violent. Spinoza, not a religious man, believed that religion was fine, but only under certain strict conditions. Faith should make people behave lovingly and peacefully, should never get mixed up in rational inquiry, and should always be controlled by the rulers of the secular state. I'm not sure I agree with the last point, but the first two are unimpeachable.

# ONE

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**FULL TENTS AND EMPTY CATHEDRALS**

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Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk.” So goes the beginning of Sinclair Lewis’s novel about the evangelical preacher Elmer Gantry, a great American character, boundless in his greed, a sinner obsessed with the Devil, a salesman of astonishing energy who believes in the greater good of his own success, a man of great charm and destructive power. It is difficult to imagine Gantry as a European. He is too capacious, too full of enthusiasm, too carelessly about fate, class, and tradition. In short, Elmer “Hellcat” Gantry is way too optimistic to be anything but a full-blooded American.

Lewis wrote his book in 1926 as an indictment of American evangelical fervor. He dedicated it to H. L. Mencken, the journalistic scourge of rural boobies, boosters, and religious hucksters. We are not supposed to admire Gantry. Indeed, we should fear him and the people who believe in hustlers like him. And yet, especially in the movie version, with the magnificent Burt Lancaster, it is difficult not to admire Gantry a little, or even to like him. Playing on people’s fear of death (the main source of his power), the preacher, like the culture that spawned him, is brimming with vitality.

The novel, as well as the film, begins, as all good stories about American preachers do, with the hero as a sinner, a drunk who sweet-talks women into shabby hotel beds only to abandon them the next morning. Folks who have found Christ like their preachers to have been sinners: that way they can identify with them; they feel like sinners themselves and live in hope of redemption. But unlike many crowd-pulling preachers, Gantry did not start as an amateur. He acquired the taste for preaching ever since he was prompted by his devout mother during Annual Prayer Week to get on his knees at the Baptist church and confess his sins: “He was certain that he would never again want to guzzle, follow loose women, to blaspheme; he knew the rapture of salvation—yes, and of being the center of interest in the crowd.”<sup>1</sup>

Gantry is later ordained in Paris, Kansas, as minister of the gospel in the Baptist Church while studying at the Mizpah Theological Seminary until he gets kicked out for spending Easter Sunday at a drunken orgy with a bunch of businessmen at the Ishawonga Hotel in the town of Monarch.

The successful evangelical preacher combines a talent for showmanship, business acumen, and a plausible air of sincerity. Scholarship is a drawback in this line of work. Learning, if acquired at all, should be disguised. The point is to be a man of the people, a regular guy, and not some stuck-up college-educated snob who thinks he is better than the rest of us. The latter type, in Lewis’s novel, is represented by the Reverend Cecil Aylston, a High Church man, English (of course), educated at Oxford. He is in fact no better than Gantry: an adulterer, a forger, and a drunk, forced to seek his fortune in the New World. But he puts on gentlemanly airs and is the devoted assistant and teacher of Sister Sharon Falconer, a pretty young preacher whom he has instructed in the use of proper English grammar and encouraged to tone down the histrionics. Gantry took one look at Sister Sharon and instantly became Aylston’s rival for her affections.

By then, after a stint as a salesman of agricultural tools, Gantry had taken up professional preaching again. He is promoted as “a power in the machinery world.” His sermon to the good people of Lincoln, advertised as “Increasing Sales with God and the Gideons,” promises to be “a revelation of the new world of better business.”

There is no need to vulgarize the flock, says Aylston, in his mincing English accent. But Gantry understands that this is precisely what is needed, even though he wouldn’t put it quite that way: “The good old-fashioned hell,” that’s what people want. Sister Sharon takes his advice and, as usual with Gantry, ends up in his bed. Coached by her lover, she becomes wildly successful as a charismatic fair

healer, telling people to drop their crutches and walk with the Lord (until they drop to the floor, out of sight of the ecstatic believers). Together Brother Elmer and Sister Sharon rake in the cash. But it doesn't last. Her world literally goes up in smoke, when a smoldering cigarette lights up her prayer tent. She dies after trying to assure the panic-stricken mob that the Lord will help her lead them safely through the flames.

The death of Sister Sharon marks the end of the movie, but not the novel. Gantry is irrepressible. Nothing will deter him in his ambition to draw bigger crowds, to make more money. No story about an American evangelical preacher is complete without a serious scandal—usually followed by redemption. Satan must have the penultimate word. So it is with Gantry, who is married by now. A sordid affair with his secretary, who attempts to blackmail him with the help of a small-time hood, is exposed in the papers. Gantry does what all good sinners do. He goes to his church and falls on his knees, stretching his arms to his flock, sobbing. And with him “they all knelt and sobbed and prayed while outside the locked glass of the church, seeing the mob kneel within, hundreds knelt on the steps of the church, on the sidewalk, all down the block.”

“Oh, my friends!” cried Elmer, “do you believe in my innocence, in the fiendishness of my accusers? Reassure me with a hallelujah!”

The church thundered with the triumphant hallelujah, and in a sacred silence Elmer prayed.

And he prays, and prays, against Satan, and for the freedom from all temptations. Then, just as he turns to include the choir in his entreaties to the Lord, he spots “a new singer, a girl with charming ankles and lively eyes,” and vows to make her acquaintance. But he doesn't let this thought interrupt the paean of his prayer for more than an instant.

Let me count this day, Lord, as the beginning of a new and more vigorous life, as the beginning of a crusade for complete morality and the domination of the Christian church through all the land. Dear Lord, thy work is but begun! We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!<sup>2</sup>

Sinclair Lewis is not a subtle novelist. His message leaves no room for ambiguities. Yet Elmer Gantry is an unforgettable character who seems like a crude caricature until one has seen his real-life colleagues on television. Examples of contemporary Gantrys are not confined to the evangelical stages. They appear in all their pomp at political party conventions in election years. Ronald Reagan had some of Gantry in him, even though he was not very religious; so had Bill Clinton and, despite his lack of natural charisma, George W. Bush, a man who exemplified to many Americans the hard road from sin to redemption. The difference between selling the gospel, agricultural machinery, or a political candidate is not always obvious in the United States. For all mix show business with populism, sentiment, the reassuring air of the regular guy, and the braggadocio of the carnival huckster.

When Rush Limbaugh, a Gantry figure if there ever was one, was interviewed at his palatial Florida mansion about his extraordinary success as a right-wing political radio jockey, he explained what drove him: “Not my political ideas. Conservatism didn't buy this house. First and foremost I'm a businessman. My first goal is to attract the largest possible audience so I can charge confiscatory advertising rates. I happen to have great entertainment skills, but that enables me to sell airtime.”<sup>3</sup> These words might have been written by Sinclair Lewis, and quite possibly we might have faulted him for laying on too thick.

In fact, Lewis's book caused such a scandal when it was published that it put evangelical preachers on the defensive. Elmer Gantry embarrassed them—that and the Scopes Monkey trial in 1925, when

high school teacher in Tennessee was prosecuted for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution, which made Pentacostalists and other holy-rolling fundamentalists look foolish. Partly as a result, they shied away from politics. And yet they still managed to cast such a long shadow over American life that when the movie version of *Elmer Gantry* came out in 1960, the producers added a message that young and impressionable children should be shielded from the contents of the film.

• • •

When Europeans watch American television, they are often astonished by the money-grubbing crassness of the present-day Elmer Gantrys. Here, they think, is a culture that truly divides the New World from the Old: the sheer vulgarity of the howling, sweating televangelists and the primitive notion of America as a land blessed by God, a City on the Hill, inhabited by a chosen people, glass-eyed, in double-knit suits.

Not just religion but American democracy itself appears to be corrupted by this type of commercial boosterism. People call the United States a democracy, but Americans don't vote for their own good or along the lines of political reason but for candidates who are most successfully marketed like movie stars or products backed by huge commercial enterprises. Venal ambition comes wrapped up in showbiz. When you add to this mix the puritanical goals of businessmen-preachers whose sermons are eagerly lapped up by millions of television viewers, Gantry's victory seems to be complete; the borders between church and state have been fatally breached. Or so it seems to many Europeans, as well as American liberals. There are plenty of examples to back this view. But is it the whole picture?

It is easy to forget that revivalism actually began in Europe, as did the idea of God-chosen countries. To Dutch Protestants rebelling against Catholic Spain in the sixteenth century, the republic was the new Zion. Scottish Presbyterians and Irish Protestants believed that they had a covenant with God in their struggle against papism. German Pietists in the seventeenth century and English Methodists, Shakers, and other dissenters in the eighteenth century preached that every man had his own pipeline to the Lord and salvation did not come from membership in established churches or need the mediation of official clerics.

The First Great Awakening in eighteenth-century America was led by an English evangelist named George Whitefield, who drew huge crowds wherever he appeared from New England to Georgia. Whitefield was a born actor. David Garrick, who attended one of his prayer meetings in England, was particularly impressed by his vivid portrayals of biblical characters. Whitefield sang and danced and hollered, leaving the crowds begging for more. His American colleague, Jonathan Edwards, is perhaps better known today. Edwards's passionate sermons about God's wrath against sinners were famous for making people swoon and faint. But of the two, people who saw them recalled, the Englishman was the more inclined to pull out all the stops.

However, even though the roots of American evangelical faith are in Europe, and Europeans were the first to spread the good word, it really came into its own in the New World. In the mid-nineteenth century, the established Anglican and Congregationalist churches of the early colonists had already been overtaken by Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and other sectarians roaming the land of cabins and prayer meetings. They were followed by Pentacostalists, Restorationists, and charismatic healers dancing and jerking, and speaking in tongues, while attendance at the old churches was shrinking. This trend has continued to this day. A Gallup Poll in 2004 found that 43 to 46 percent of Americans think of themselves as born-again Christians, and 77 percent of American Christians believe in Hell and 71 percent in Satan. Meanwhile in France, a largely Catholic country, less than 20 percent even bother

attend Mass. In the rest of Europe many of the most ancient churches and cathedrals are kept open for tourists, while the less distinguished ones are turned into chic apartment buildings or mosques. This is why more and more liberal Europeans sneer at America, especially when a president presents himself as a born-again sinner and redemption man.

Scorn for the culture of the United States has a long history in Europe, to be sure. When a famous Dutch writer named Menno ter Braak published an essay in 1928 titled *Why I Disdain "America"* without ever having set foot there, no one found this remarkable. *Amerikanismus* (Heidegger's term) was seen by Ter Braak and other conservatives as a threat to European civilization. It was shallow, devoid of high culture, greedy, obsessed with meretricious fame, and so on. An excess of religious fervor was usually not something cultural conservatives in Europe held against the materialistic New World. Today's European critics of the United States, however, who cite evangelical fervor as one of the reasons for their disdain, sound much like Menno Ter Braak. Evangelical zeal has to be the result of deep ignorance, cultural emptiness, and an addiction to celebrity and primitive pizzazz.

There is, however, another possible explanation for the success of popular faith that throws a less negative light on the American scene. The peculiar forms that Christian faith has taken in the United States are in fact closely linked to American democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville, an aristocrat who celebrated the birth of democracy while fearing some of its consequences, wrote that the religious atmosphere was the first thing that struck him on arrival in the United States. A pious Catholic himself, he approved of religion; indeed, he thought it was indispensable to maintain social stability, especially in a democracy. For moral ties had to be tightened, in his view, when political ties were relaxed. And this could only be done through religious faith.

Tocqueville traveled in America during the Second Great Awakening, when Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses headed for the western frontier. It was a time of camp meetings: lonely settlers from isolated outposts would gather for weeks at a time, dancing and praying for salvation. Two things struck Tocqueville about the religious atmosphere he encountered. One was the devotion to liberty: "For the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other; it is not a question with them of sterile beliefs bequeathed by the past and vegetating rather than living in the depths of the soul."<sup>4</sup> This was in contrast to Europe. In France, wrote Tocqueville, "I had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land."<sup>5</sup>

The other thing he noted was the worldly character of much religious preaching. While paying proper attention to the future life, American preachers freely allowed their followers "to give some of their hearts' care to the needs of the present, apparently considering the good things of this world as objects of some, albeit secondary importance."<sup>6</sup> The "honest pursuit of prosperity" was clearly seen as a good thing. The pursuit of material success and hope for salvation in the next world were not distinct, but closely linked. It is a point Tocqueville might have made about Protestantism in Europe too, but in the United States he found that this was the dominant ethos even of the Catholic faith.

The reason why Americans were so religious, while in Europe the churches were under attack (as Tocqueville's evident dismay), was the severance in the United States of church and state. "I have no hesitation," wrote Tocqueville, "in stating that throughout my stay in America I met nobody, lay or cleric, who did not agree about that."<sup>7</sup> He thought it was especially important in democracies not only to have strong faith but also to keep it well away from worldly power, because political theories, not to mention political leaders, come and go. If the Americans, "who have handed over the world of politics to the experiments of innovators, had not placed religion beyond their reach, what could

hold on to in the ebb and flow of human opinions?”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Americans felt that they could believe freely, not just because religious freedom was protected by the Constitution but because religious authority was not in the hands of world politicians. Again, Tocqueville points out the difference with Europe in one of the most important passages of *Democracy in America*: “Unbelievers in Europe attack Christians more as political than as religious enemies; they hate faith as the opinion of a party much more than as a mistaken belief, and they reject the clergy less because they are the representatives of God than because they are the friends of authority.”<sup>9</sup>

The third thing noticed by Tocqueville about American religious practices was the lack of traditional flimflam, of smells and bells, of robes, miters, and other signs of rank, or deference custom. The Great Awakenings, all the barking and swooning and fainting notwithstanding, were an assault on the authority of established churches as much as French Jacobinism was, even though it was considerably less violent. The aim of French revolutionaries was to build a secular republic on the ashes of the oppressive Catholic Church. Most of them were opposed to the church that baptized them. But they did not seek alternative ways to Jerusalem, in freelance churches. For the face of God still bore the features of the hated priests.

Americans, too, revolted against the established church. In New England, for example, where Anglicanism was the official religion and heresy was still a capital offense in the eighteenth century, people were burned at the stake for their godlessness. Thomas Jefferson, himself raised in the English Church, made it clear that worldly powers should have no authority over matters of faith: “our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”<sup>10</sup>

Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment, a Francophile who believed passionately in reason. He was probably less religious than Tocqueville, but in regards to religious freedom his cause was the same as that of the Restorationists, the “New Lights” Congregationalists, and other Protestants of the Great Awakening, who believed that men could be born again through God’s grace and held no truck with the hierarchy of Old World churches. Jefferson may have had nothing much in common with the charismatic holy-rollers and fire-and-brimstone preachers of Georgia or upstate New York, but when it came to their freedom to believe whatever they wanted, in any way they wanted, he was entirely on their side.

Elmer Gantry’s scorn for the pretensions of Cecil Aylston was shared by the early revivalists who set up shop along the new frontier. As Frank Lambert, historian of the Great Awakening, put it: “The spirit of the American Revolution tilted toward New Light individualism, encouraging an ‘egalitarian theology’ and a ‘Christianity of the people.’ . . . [They] insisted that, as in politics, in religion all are on equal footing before God.”<sup>11</sup>

This was true of course only up to a point—the main point being slavery. George Whitefield was unusual for his time in that he preached to slaves and prayed for their salvation. But he was not opposed to the system and even owned a few slaves himself while living in Georgia. However, Tocqueville had another insight that still helps us understand something about America today. Shocked by the violence of the French Revolution, Tocqueville was fascinated by why other societies avoided such a cataclysmic event, especially aristocratic England with its vast differences in standing and wealth. Religion had to have something to do with it. Catholicism, he mused, “may dispose the

faithful to obedience, but it does not prepare them for inequality. However, I would say that Protestantism in general orients men much less toward equality than toward independence.”<sup>12</sup>

So not only did the evangelical brand of American Protestantism favor histrionic emotion over superior learning and democracy over authoritarianism, but it was also a brand of individualism that tolerated inequality as long as men were free to compete for “the good things of this world.” Some forms of American evangelism were (and still are) actively opposed to capitalism, but one can see why free religious enterprise could also be used to promote it. Perhaps it was precisely because people were convinced that they, or at least all white folks, were equal before God that they could live more easily with being unequal in this world. A Marxist would say, with some justice, that this is precisely why capitalists have a reason to promote that faith.

A system that promotes economic and political freedom does not, however, exclude moral bigotry. The puritan ethics that Tocqueville saw as the bedrock of American society and a necessary condition for building stable democratic institutions in the United States also bred a degree of social conformity that dismayed him. Like all survivors of revolutionary violence, Tocqueville was fearful of mass conformity, which could easily lead to mob rule. The same people, who insisted on their individual rights as citizens of a democratic republic, were capable of inflicting horrific violence on others on the basis of their sexual practices or simply the color of their skin. Religion has often been used to justify such savagery.

Europeans, though less prone, in recent times, to turn to God as an ally, have stained their history with even more blood than the Americans. And the establishment of democracies in Europe has been, on the whole, a more painful process. Religion has had much to do with this. The question is, however, whether this reveals a rift between the Old World and the New World or more between religious traditions that cut across that wide watery divide.

• • •

As the First Great Awakening was taking place in the United States in the middle of the eighteenth century, David Hume wrote his essay “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm.” It is in some ways a surprising essay for a man of his conservative temperament, though not untypical of certain English prejudices. Hume, like Spinoza a century earlier, had little respect for any form of religion. A religion is “false,” as far as he was concerned, but he made some interesting distinctions and was more inclined than Spinoza to recognize the importance of religious institutions. There were two kinds of believers, in his view: the superstitious and the enthusiasts. The former tend to be fearful, melancholy, even abject, and thus much too timorous to approach the Divinity by themselves. This is why, in Hume’s words, “superstition is favorable to priestly power.”<sup>13</sup>

Enthusiasts, on the other hand, are drawn to irrationality by a surfeit of self-confidence: “Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of enthusiasm.” While the superstitious turn anxiously to churchly authority for mediation between Man and God, enthusiasts “have been free from the yoke of ecclesiastics, and have expressed great independence of devotion; with a contempt of forms, ceremonies, and traditions.” More than that, “The fanatic consecrates himself and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other.”

Not a bad description of the European—and especially the American—evangelicals. As typical examples of religious fanaticism Hume mentions the early Quakers in England, followed by the Presbyterians, the Anabaptists in Germany, and the Camisards in France. But fanaticism, Hume observes, is hard to sustain for very long. And so he concludes: “Religions, which partake of

enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition but in a little time become more gentle and moderate.”

Of the different falsehoods, superstition is the more dangerous, as it “steals in gradually and insensibly; renders men tame and submissive; is acceptable to the magistrate, and seems inoffensive to the people: Till at last the priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society, by his endless contentions, persecutions, and religious wars.” Hence Hume’s observation that “superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it,” because the latter destroys ecclesiastical power, even as the superstitious “groan under the dominion of priests.”

Having enjoyed the blessings of a patriotic Dutch education, which included a great deal of Protestant propaganda against the evils of Catholic Spain, I cannot but see merit in Hume’s analysis. And yet the furious and violent stages of religious enthusiasm can disturb human society just as much as priestly despotism and, far from dissipating, have a way of coming back. One does not have to be a ferocious anti-American to see evangelical enthusiasm behind the hubristic attempts to transform the world by force. And besides, the violence unleashed in the religious wars of seventeenth-century Europe was hardly the sole responsibility of tyrannical priests. Nor can Protestant savagery be ascribed simply to an early burst of enthusiasm. And as far as tyranny is concerned, Spinoza was surely right to see Cromwell as an equally authoritarian ruler as the king he violently replaced. Hume, to be fair, saw Cromwell as a dangerous enthusiast as well, but one who also brought more liberty.

Like Hobbes and Spinoza before him, Hume was concerned about taming the violent passions of religious believers, as well as stopping religious irrationality from interfering with rational inquiry—two essential conditions for any democratic system to succeed. Hume believed that once the violent stage was over, a more liberal Protestant version of Christianity could contribute to political liberty, but only if the wild, intolerant, and superstitious elements of religion were kept firmly in check. Hume was a great believer in institutions, including the established church. The Anglican Church was necessary, in his view, for the stability of English society, and this included the civil liberties that English people were fortunate enough to enjoy.

Hume’s conservatism was a typical example of English compromise. An agnostic on miracles and deeply suspicious of all clerics, Hume did not accept that morality was God-given. He believed in the use of reason and was a promoter of science and philosophy, which he never confused with theology. But reason was not enough to explain everything. Nature and human life were too full of mysteries. And if morality could not be based entirely on human reason, nor could political institutions. In extreme cases, people were entitled to rebel against a tyrant, but “the people” could no more choose their system of government than their native languages or cultural habits. Political legitimacy was neither divinely ordained nor a matter of popular sovereignty but of tradition, history, sentiment, prejudice, and institutions grown over time. Precisely because he was a man of the Enlightenment, Hume was convinced that nothing could be known absolutely. That is why man needs custom and tradition to guide him. This is the basis of British “mixed government,” of anchoring society in the established church, the aristocracy, the monarchy, and an elected parliament—not because God wills it so but because man needs it.

Hobbes and Spinoza were more radical. Since morality is not determined by a higher being, men in the state of nature, as conceived by Hobbes, are ruled by their desires, their fears, and their ignorance. This can only result in anarchy and perpetual warfare—“the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>14</sup> Religious strife occurs because men, in their dark ignorance, will follow priests, prophets, and seers, who promote competing metaphysical recipes to ease their fears. The only thing for it, then, is to establish an absolute worldly authority, which will crush these competing superstitions, take control of the church, and impose moral behavior by force. This way there would be

peace, order, and room for rational thinkers to search for the truth unhindered by the peddlers of irrationality.

Hobbes was one of the authors in Christian Europe of “the Great Separation.”<sup>15</sup> Following in the footsteps of Machiavelli, he introduced a science of politics based on secular interests, divorced from metaphysical justifications. The only way for man to be delivered from the brutal state of nature, and the dangerous blandishments of religious pied pipers, was to have a political system ruled by an enlightened tyrant—secular, and decidedly undemocratic.

Spinoza took a similar view of the state of nature but came to a different, far more democratic conclusion. In Spinoza’s state of nature, it is every man for himself. There is no such thing as good or bad, whether or not divinely decreed. Survival is all that matters, and no one can feel safe in a state where all is permitted and everyone is a potential enemy. Cooperation, alliances, laws, and society are necessary conditions for “supporting life and cultivating the mind.” Not only that, but even “natural right” is only conceivable when “men have general rights, and combine to defend the possession of the lands they inhabit and cultivate, to protect themselves, to repel all violence, and to live according to the general judgment of all.” This is what Spinoza calls “dominion.”<sup>16</sup>

However, unlike Hobbes, Spinoza did not favor a tyrannical form of dominion, an aristocratic one, or even a mixed one, like Hume, but a democracy, by which he meant something reasonably close to what we understand by that term today: “For all, who are born of citizen parents, or on the soil of the country, or who have deserved well of the republic, or have accomplished any other conditions upon which the law grants to a man right of citizenship; they all, I say, have a right to demand for themselves the right to vote in the supreme council and to fill public offices, nor can they be refused it, but for crime or infamy.”<sup>17</sup>

Religious believers have often denounced Spinoza, or “Spinozism,” as being anti-religious or atheist. He was indeed an atheist in the sense that he did not believe in a deity who created and guided the cosmos. God, in his mind, was another word for nature. But he was not anti-religion per se. Spinoza recognized that religious belief could promote love and charity. But the state had no right to tell us what to believe. In his words: “The care of propagating religion should be left to God, or the supreme authorities, upon whom alone falls the charge of affairs of state.”<sup>18</sup> This sounds a little muddled. If the state has no business telling us what to believe, why should it have any more business promoting belief? The only answer can be that, above all, Spinoza wanted the state to control the church, even when it came to promoting the faith. But the state had no right to tell citizens *what* faith to adopt, or indeed to adopt any particular faith at all.

Religion, in other words, is a private affair, but its propagation cannot be left to the churches. Spinoza left no room for autonomous religious institutions—that would have opened the way to priestly abuse of power. He did not wish to grant churches any special privileges: no land, no tax breaks, no authority over religious doctrine, no right to censor opinions, and so on. This was a radical position, considering the time and place in which he held it (seventeenth-century Holland, where the churches were very powerful indeed). Too radical for most countries, even today.

The excellent scholar of Dutch history, Jonathan Israel, has made a strong case that the radical “Early Enlightenment” of Spinoza was the truly democratic one.<sup>19</sup> Later Enlightenment thinkers, such as Hume and Locke, watered down the intellectual achievements of the seventeenth-century radicals by making too many compromises, in terms of class privileges, as well as organized faith. Spinoza really did think that everyone should be free to believe—or not believe—whatever he wished, as long as he did not break the law or cause harm to others. Locke, on the other hand, barely tolerated Catholics, was suspicious of Jews, and did not tolerate atheists.

From Israel's keenly Spinozist perspective, the "mixed governments" of the British and Dutch monarchies, one with an established church protected by the sovereign and the other with a plethora of church-affiliated political parties, are the diminished heirs of the compromised late Enlightenment. They are better than tyrannies, to be sure, but not as good as they ought to have been, and certainly not as good as received Anglo-Saxon opinion thinks they are. The French republic had higher ideals, more in line with the Early Enlightenment, which was the source, Israel writes, "of the strand of republicanism which developed ultimately into Jacobinism, and attempted, after 1789, to eradicate monarchy, social hierarchy, and ecclesiastical power by means of revolution."<sup>20</sup>

The link is clearly there, even though Spinoza was not as dogmatic as the Jacobins about politics or religion. But there is no doubt that the French Revolution crushed organized religion and paved the way for political arrangements that were more secularist<sup>21</sup> than existed anywhere else at the time. The question is whether these arrangements were also more democratic, or liberal, than the mixed governments of other European states. And it is not clear either that opposing the Catholic Church meant a real reduction in faith. Perhaps it merely displaced it.

• • •

In 1989, the fateful year of democratic revolts against communist tyranny, François Mitterrand, president of France, invited his fellow European leaders to celebrate the bicentenary of the French Revolution. It looked as though the whole world had come to Paris, streaming down the Champs-Élysées, Europeans, Americans, Africans, but also Chinese refugees from the failed Tiananmen Rebellion, to pay tribute to France as the *patrie* of Fraternity, Equality, and Liberty. Forgetting, for a moment, Robespierre and the Terror, the French Revolution, and especially the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, as proclaimed in the National Assembly in April 1789, were officially presented as the quasi-sacred sources of democratic freedom in the world. Only Margaret Thatcher, one of the official guests, tried to put a damper on the joyful mood by pointing out that British freedoms owed nothing to France and everything to the Magna Carta.

Writing brilliantly about the occasion in the *New York Review of Books*, the Irish intellectual Conor Cruise O'Brien made a similar point more amusingly. First of all, he observed, the French Revolution owed a great deal to English and especially American thinkers. Voltaire, Montesquieu, and even Rousseau, until he changed his mind, were admirers of British and American liberties. John Locke was one of Voltaire's idols. O'Brien also points out the roles played by Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson, who was the U.S. ambassador in Paris during the revolution. Lafayette, as the hero of the American Revolution, was the first to propose a Declaration to the French Assembly, and the revolutionary thinkers visited Jefferson's ambassadorial residence to solicit his advice.

In O'Brien's account, the French ended up forsaking the moderating influences of Locke, Lafayette, and Jefferson and opted for a kind of statist absolutism instead. Borrowing from Spinoza's idea of the secular state as an embodiment of the general will, or common good, Rousseau wrote his *Social Contract* in 1762. It was an attempt to devise a blueprint for a society where the sovereign people were as equal and free as in the state of nature, while abiding by the laws that expressed the general will. The substance of this general will, which was supposed to be infallible, like the most despotic Catholic popes, was not entirely clear. It would have to involve some form of religion, "civil religion," in Rousseau's words, that transcended individual interests and bound the citizens together. Rousseau, unlike some of his radical predecessors but like Locke, and indeed Tocqueville, believed that when people have to cooperate, they need a common faith, albeit not one derived from the authority of a church. And the general will would have to be imposed. Rousseau: "In order the

that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body.”<sup>22</sup>

This idea was incorporated in a much harsher form by Rousseau’s disciple, Abbé Sieyès, into the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The nation was fetishized as the embodiment of the general will: “The nation exists before all, it is the origin of everything. Its will is always legal, is the law itself.”<sup>23</sup> Article 3 of the Declaration stipulated: “The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation: no group, no individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly therefrom.” This idea would lend itself not only to chauvinism but also to a new form of ideological oppression. For the power of whoever represented the nation, as the embodiment of the general will, was hard to challenge. To dissent from the will of the people was to be an enemy, or a traitor. That is how Robespierre saw the enemies of the people: “Our will is the general will.” It was as if the rebellion against absolute monarchy and the Catholic Church had replaced one kind of absolutism with another.

This is a price that is often paid when tyrannies are overthrown by zealots. Spinoza rightly detected this in the English revolution of the 1640s. As O’Brien says: “Robespierre’s relation to the general will is precisely that of Cromwell to God.”<sup>24</sup> The “enthusiasm” with which priests and nobles were hanged and churches burned by the French revolutionaries (or, much later, leftist republicans in the Spanish Civil War) showed the zealotry to which people can be driven by too many years of oppressive dogmatism.

Outside France, even thinkers who had been sympathetic to the revolutionary cause were shocked by the violence. Some ended up seeing the French Revolution as a tragedy. The chaos of France was a great spur for British conservatism. Lord Acton, a liberal Catholic in the mold of Tocqueville, declared that the French Revolution threw away the hope of freedom because of the passion for equality. Equality, in conservative British thinking, was equated with coercion.

Edmund Burke argued, like Hume, that the destruction of traditional institutions is always followed by something worse. Hence the desire for stability, including the stability that hierarchies bring. One does not have to be a passionate believer in God to wish for the preservation of the Anglican Church, or a passionate devotee of monarchy to strive for its continuation. In fact, passion is to be distrusted. It is precisely to contain the lethal passions of man that tradition is needed. When British thinkers denounced the French Revolution for its godlessness, they did not do so as religious fanatics but as traditionalists who equated British liberties with ancient customs, from King Alfred’s Constitution to the rites of the Church of England. Their problem was not with liberty; indeed, they argued that the God-fearing British, who accepted that inequality was part of the human condition, were freer than the godless French *citoyens* who were forced to conform to a blueprint for democratic utopia.

British conservatives had a peculiar ally of sorts in one of the most ferocious French authoritarianism thrown up by the Enlightenment: Joseph de Maistre. A minor aristocrat from the south and a Jesuit by education, Maistre was a liberal of sorts until the revolution and its aftermath changed his mind radically. Revolution now struck him as God’s punishment for the hubris of man. Not an especially pious figure, he still exalted the Catholic Church because of its divine authority and its dogmatism. He pinned for the return of absolute monarchy and believed that only the most punitive justice could suppress the evil nature of man.

Rationalism, science, equality, natural rights, democracy, liberalism—these were all loathsome concepts to him. He was a leading light of the counter-Enlightenment, but not because of some Romantic passion for mystery or obscurantism. He was not a Romantic. He was a radical pessimist.

The Enlightenment, to him, would not bring progress, liberty, or greater knowledge, but chaos, violence, and depravity. Man could not be left to his own devices. That is why order had to be enforced by traditional authority, prejudice, instinct, and the hangman. If men decline, he wrote, “recognize authority where it legitimately lies—in the Church and the ‘*divinisé*’ monarchy—they will fall under the yoke of the tyranny of the people, which is the worst of all.”<sup>25</sup>

But Maistre made an odd exception for England. The English, he said, had an unwritten constitution, which was divinely inspired, as it were. Their constitution was not the product of rational thought but merely “felt,” and thus for Maistre a more reliable source of authority than all the shallow and misguided institutions that rationalists put their trust in.

Burke and other British conservatives might easily have gone along with this, even though they didn’t share Maistre’s brutal authoritarianism or indeed his pessimism. Isaiah Berlin wrote about Maistre that temperamentally he resembled his enemies. Like the Jacobins, he was a destroyer, a hater, an extremist. The revolutionaries wished to demolish the old order, create a tabula rasa, and build a new social order from scratch. Maistre, in Berlin’s words, “was the polar opposite of this. He attacked eighteenth-century rationalism with the intolerance and the passion, the power and the gusto of the great revolutionaries themselves.”<sup>26</sup>

The difference between France and Britain, or indeed the United States, is the role of the Catholic Church. As Tocqueville pointed out, European unbelievers attacked the church more as a political than a religious enemy. He was certainly right about France. The Catholic Church was an extremely powerful political institution, with vast wealth in land and treasure. The Vatican was a source of absolute truth, and the authority of priests was almost total. The despotic monarchy of France was intimately linked to the church, which is why the Jacobins had to destroy both. Even though Louis XVI was far from despotic, they needed to crush the monarchy and purge religion from the public realm to put the secular state out of the church’s reach. And Maistre, followed by generations of Catholic reactionaries, bent on revenge for the defeat of 1789, longed to revive the authority of church and monarchy to restore the original order.

Thomas Jefferson did not have this problem: Catholics were a vulnerable minority in the United States. This would change in the nineteenth century when new immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Germany made the Roman church into the largest single Christian denomination and inspired considerable hostility. Only when Protestant hostility to Catholics more or less disappeared could the United States truly be called a country of religious tolerance. But that was in the twentieth century. In the early nineteenth century Tocqueville observed acutely that Catholics wanted all rights to be respected so that “they could be sure to enjoy their own in freedom.” That is why they were less “perhaps in spite of themselves, toward political doctrines which, maybe, they would adopt with less zeal were they rich and predominant.”<sup>27</sup>

Jefferson did, of course, follow the French model in pushing religion out of the public sphere. As he said about Pennsylvania and New York, two states without established churches: “They have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them.” But he did so not as an enemy of religion. He felt no need to destroy the churches, for none had anything like the power enjoyed by the Catholic Church under the *ancien régime* in France. On the contrary, he believed that separation of church and state would benefit religion.

On this issue, Jefferson was unwilling to compromise. But in his politics, he was not at all radical. His ideal was a stable rural society of educated farmers disposed to democracy, because they were responsible for the land they owned. Although by no means a promoter of slavery, he did own slaves himself. And democracy, in his mind, was not really compatible with an industrial society.

where large numbers of manual workers lived in huge, “pestilential” cities. He prized independence which went together with ownership, and distrusted too much government. He wrote in his autobiography: “It is not by the consolidation, or concentration of powers, but by their distribution that good government is effected.” And: “The purpose of establishing different houses of legislation is to introduce the influence of different interests or different principles.”<sup>28</sup>

This could not be further removed from the Jacobin idea of the state as the embodiment of the people’s will. But even on the religious front, Jefferson’s notion of the secular state, strictly neutral in all religious matters, would soon be challenged by Christians who had a very different idea of the state. Already in the presidential campaign of 1800, Christian believers were accusing Jefferson of being an atheist and thus unfit to be president. Since Christians live “under the law of Christ,” intoned John Mitchell Mason, a Presbyterian minister from New York, they should speak out against the falsehoods of party politics.<sup>29</sup> People like Mason continue to argue that the United States is a Christian nation and that the state has the duty to uphold Christian morals, in terms of family life, sexual practices, or the teaching of biology.

Yet they, too, are unlike their French counterparts, for their belief in American democracy, and the uniqueness of American freedoms, stands in stark contrast to the revanchist politics of Maistre, Charles Maurras, founder of the extreme right-wing Action Française, or Marshal Pétain, all of whom viewed democracy, and particularly the United States, with the deepest suspicion. American Christians of the Right may not be liberals and may even be bigots, but they still profess to believe in democracy. They believe, as much as atheists, in the American civil religion, the difference being their conviction that freedom was bestowed on His chosen land by God.

Civil religion is a product of the democratic revolutions, both in the United States and France. What they have in common is their claim to a universal validity, like Christianity, or indeed Islam. The Napoleonic conquests, no less than the American idea of manifest destiny, were justified by the universalist claim. French republicanism, in the minds of its promoters, with its rationalist ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, could and indeed should be applied everywhere. In the American case the secularist idealism of the founding fathers has been complicated by the assertion among Christian believers that the nation’s destiny is guided by higher powers.

Since such metaphysical assertions can still be heard in the United States today, Europeans are inclined to agree with the American essentialists that they reflect a uniquely American phenomenon. This, too, however, is an error. Similar claims have been made by Protestants in other Western democracies, including or indeed especially in Spinoza’s native country, the Netherlands. The political philosophy of the great Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was but one example of an attempt to bring order over Europe in the mid-nineteenth century to claw back European politics from Enlightenment liberalism. As an orthodox Calvinist, he was hostile to the Catholic Church. His idea of the true Dutch nation was soundly Protestant, an identity forged in the eighty-year revolt against the Spanish king. But he was entirely sympathetic to Pius IX’s all-out attack on godless rationalism and liberalism. His political party, which he led for many years as a cabinet minister and prime minister, was called the Anti-Revolutionary Party.

The revolution it opposed was of course the French one. Kuyper rather admired the American Revolution and was a follower of Burke. But his admiration did not really take into account Jefferson’s Enlightenment ideals. What he liked especially about the United States was its Protestant religiosity and the peaceful nature of its democratic institutions. He shared Burke’s hostility to the French Revolution, even though Burke’s traditionalist view of the Anglican Church was liberal compared to Kuyper’s Calvinist orthodoxy.

In some ways, Kuyper was very much like his populist Christian American counterparts. He

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