Looking backward, Ockham's critique of essences and eternal ideas can be seen as the ultimate stage of a war which from its outset the Christian church had waged against polytheism. For polytheism survived as a temptation to multiply the non-material agencies at work in the world, agencies that interposed in the relations between God and man. Ockham wielding his 'razor' preserved something of the spirit of that war against 'pagan' superstition. Looking forward, there is little doubt that Ockham's analysis of empirical reasoning — his understanding of causation in terms of regular succession or constant conjunction of events — contributed to developments in the following century which provided the bridge between Aristotle's physics and modern physics. Ockham's insistence on the difference between 'reasons' and 'causes' prepared the way for a kind of Christian positivism, and for the disenchantment of the physical world.

Yet Ockham's programme was not reductionist. He was no materialist. Underpinning his analysis of the difference between understanding 'culture' and 'nature' was a firm faith that God's free activity lay beneath each. Ockham would have been dismayed to see how, a few centuries later, his analysis of causation became joined to materialist assumptions directed against theism, a combination he would have dismissed as a new form of rationalist arrogance.

Ockham's defence of both natural rights and the limitations of human reason sprang from his belief in the omnipresence of God's freedom. If we were to put this defence in contemporary scientific terms, we might say that Ockham took up his stand on the principle of indeterminacy. He would have welcomed evidence of a 'big bang' at the beginning of things and the difficulty of capturing space-time in a single, unified theory. In our time, freedom has moved cosmology beyond a mechanistic model of the universe.

24

Struggling for Representative Government in the Church

We are nearing the end of our story. We have seen how Christian egalitarianism (the 'care of souls') first shaped the distinction between spiritual and temporal authority, creating a sphere for individual conscience. We then followed the gradual but far from complete penetration of this egalitarianism into traditional beliefs — emerging as a kind of schizophrenia among the Carolingians. Finally, we discovered its full potential for transforming institutions in the papal revolution of the twelfth century, when the idea of a 'sovereign' authority over individuals, embodied in a coherent legal system, not only transformed the church, but also began to inspire secular rulers with the project of creating 'states' out of the jumble of feudal jurisdictions.

The egalitarian moral intuitions generated by the 'care of souls', which had helped to undermine ancient slavery, became a far more formidable weapon once they were defined into the idea of sovereignty. Permanent inequalities of social status came under increasing threat. But if creating a sovereign authority provided the means of liberating people from the ties of inherited status and custom, it also created a new threat. Would the claim of 'sovereignty' create a monopoly of power as well as of final legal authority? Would the idea of sovereignty become an instrument of tyranny rather than liberation? Would 'equal subjection' crush the claims of 'equal liberty'?

These questions arose first in the church. For by the fourteenth century there was considerable disquiet in the Church about the growth of papal 'absolutism'. What, after all, had been the crux of the papal revolution? Identifying the papacy as the final judge and supreme legislator of the church had been necessary to create a self-contained system of canon law. Such a postulate was necessary to establish the
THE BIRTH PANGS OF MODERN LIBERTY

‘equal subjection’ of all Christians to church authority. The pope, as the ‘sovereign’ pontiff, could then address his subjects individually – as members of the ecclesia christiana – rather than through intermediaries.

Yet what had been the result of acknowledging papal sovereignty? During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries papal power and pretensions had escalated. Developments since the papal revolution revealed only too clearly the centralizing potential of the idea of sovereignty. Increasing papal control over dioceses, monasteries and religious orders – especially control over the granting of benefices – had led to ever greater papal claims. At the outset of his pontificate, in 1198, Innocent III declared that he was ‘lower than God, but higher than man’.

According to Innocent III, the Pope’s plenitudo potestatis not only set him above all other prelates but also above the law, supra jus . . . Innocent IV went still further, asserting that the possession of plenitudo potestatis enabled the Pope to exercise temporal power as well as spiritual power . . .

The ground was thus well prepared for the concept of plenitudo potestatis as an illimitable, all-embracing sovereignty . . .

This expansion of papal claims led to conflicts with secular rulers, the dramatic disputes between Innocent IV and the Emperor Frederick II and between Boniface VIII and the French king, Philip the Fair. Secular rulers complained that the papacy was itself endangering the distinction between sacred and secular authority. Yet even before these conflicts, opposition to extreme papal claims had developed within the church itself. The church had existed for more than a thousand years. It had developed with a multiplicity of jurisdictions, such as those of bishops, cathedral chapters and monasteries, a multiplicity reflected in the ever-increasing amount of litigation coming before church courts. Recognizing the papacy as the final legal arbiter was one thing, but abandoning claims long sanctioned by custom or earlier church ‘law’ was another.

Papal ambitions ran up against not only the traditional autonomy of diocesan bishops but also the new importance of the college of cardinals. In due course, both of these contributed to the reaction against extreme papal claims. But it was a reaction prepared by the canonists who, while developing the system of church law, had also been debating the extent of papal authority. How should the church respond to papal claims, if exaggerated? Canon lawyers commenting on Gratian’s Decretum (the Decretists) did not doubt papal ‘headship’ of the church. They cited gospel accounts of the Christ describing Peter as the ‘rock’ on which he would build the church and giving Peter the ‘keys’ to the kingdom of God.

Yet, while respecting the primacy of the papacy, the canonists, as lawyers, were also concerned to identify the limits of papal authority, a concern emerging in their discussions of whether a heretical pope could be removed and whether crimes or scandalous conduct could also justify replacing a pope. However, the procedure for doing any such thing remained uncertain for these canonists, who acknowledged that a pope could not normally be judged by his legal ‘inferiors’.

Questions about papal authority were becoming increasingly specific and urgent. Could popes, on their own authority, redefine the articles of faith? Did a heretical pope cease, ipso facto, to be pope? Could a pope be judged or deposed by a general council of the church? And what became of papal authority when a pope died, resigned, or, worse still, if there were rival pontiffs? Did not ultimate authority reside in the church as a whole, the ecclesia christiana?

Worries about the centralizing of power in the papacy may have contributed to the canonists translating the ancient theory of natural law into a theory of natural rights. In their eyes, the protection of moral agency – and with it, God’s claim on man – was the justification for investing sovereign authority in the papacy. Running through the canonists’ writings was a concern for the quality of intentions. They began to stake out the difference between a legitimate authority, resting on consent, and mere conformity of behaviour, resulting from coercion or the fear of power. The strong implication of such canonist thinking was that natural rights provided a framework which constrained the exercise of authority within the church.

To answer questions about the limits of papal authority, canonists fell back on the egalitarian moral intuitions that had given rise to the idea of sovereignty. They drew on the belief in moral equality in order to review claims that popes were not subject to any human authority, to censure or deposition. The canonists began to argue that only the whole church or ‘congregation of the faithful’ could be considered
unerring in faith. Typically, William of Ockham would later make this point with his cutting irony, saying that even if the entire church hierarchy became corrupt, the faith would be preserved by 'women, children and idiots'...

Brian Tierney has shown how canonic thinking about the limits of papal authority developed through several stages. In the twelfth century, among the Decretists, there was a widespread, if only tacit, acceptance that papal authority could not extend to redefining the articles of faith. These had been defined by the four earliest 'universal' councils of the Church. 'The Pope, it was held, was supreme judge in cases involving articles of faith, but the Pope himself was required to judge in accordance with the canons of the General Councils.'

Nor was that all. The protection of God's claims on conscience - what St Paul had called 'Christian liberty' - also limited the papal claim to a sovereign authority. Thus, while the twelfth-century canonists regularly asserted papal primacy, the well-being of the whole church remained their final criterion. 'It was commonly held that he [the pope] could not dispense against the decree of a Council in any matter that affected the general well-being of the Church.' And for canonists that well-being was now understood partly in terms of natural rights. But how was excessive centralizing of power in the papacy to be avoided in practice? That was the rub. The Decretists did not succeed in finding a solution.

By the thirteenth century the accumulation of papal legislation, or decretals, ushered in a new phase of canonist commentary. At first glance this phase - described as that of Decretalists rather than of the Decretists - seemed to represent the triumph of extreme papal claims. For the discussion of papal sovereignty was shaped by popes Innocent III and Innocent IV, who were themselves canon lawyers and laid a radical emphasis on plenitude potestatis.

That was not the whole story, however. At the same time the canonists developed a new theory about the nature of 'corporations', a theory which had the potential to undermine extreme interpretations of papal sovereignty. It was a theory which sought to defend the moral agency of individuals by limiting the claims to authority of those governing 'corporations'. In the first half of the thirteenth century they [the canonists] built up the doctrine, denied only by Innocent IV and hardly challenged after Hostiensis, that authority in a corporation was not concentrated in the head but resided in all the members...

The theory developed out of reflections about the authority of bishops, in relation to their diocese and to the canons of their cathedral. This was interpreted as a 'delegated' authority, limited by the purposes for which it was delegated and always subject to the best interests of those whom it represented. Corporations were no longer understood as having a reality apart from their members. 'Medieval lawyers described corporations as a fiction of the law precisely because they attributed actual reality only to the individual persons who composed it.' This was a fundamental change. For it involved passing from representation understood as personification - relying on the metaphor of the 'head' ruling the body - to representation understood as the explicit delegation of authority from the members of the community to its head. Representation ceased to be a metaphor.

The development of this theory of corporation law amounted to the emergence of a theory of representative government. It was driven by the needs of the church, contending with complex relations between its multiple jurisdictions. These needs sprang not only from ancient associations such as the diocese and the monastery, but new forms of association such as the friars and the universities. The new understanding of the nature of a corporation was applied to these associations, and involved attributing an underlying equality of status to their members. Claims to authority could therefore no longer be taken for granted.

Questions ... were constantly arising on the level of practical litigation. Where did authority in a church reside, in the head or in all the members? And who were the 'members' of a church in this sense? Could a bishop act in the affairs of his diocese without consulting his canons? If so, in what types of business? If not, did he need the consent of the canons or only their counsel? Could an abbot take an oath on behalf of his whole convent of monks? Did he require consent of the monks to act as their representative in so doing? What was the source of a prelate's jurisdiction? How could a bishop be prevented from acting against the interests of his church? Did the rights of a bishop devolve to his canons during an episcopal vacancy? Did they so devolve if the bishop was negligent?
The theory of corporation law developed in response to these questions was at first applied only to parts of the church, rather than to the church as a whole. But it reshaped legal language and thinking in a way that was fraught with consequences. Canonists insisted that the authority of bishops must no longer be understood in terms of ownership. It was not dominium in the ancient sense of the word, with the radical subordination that implied. Only the community of the faithful as a whole could be said to have dominium over the church and its goods.

By contrast, the bishop’s authority was a conditional authority, founded on and respecting the moral agency of those subject to his authority. The bishop began to be described as an agent or ‘proctor’, a term drawn from Roman law, but reinterpreted by the canonist Hostiensis so that the most important transactions by their bishop required the express consent of the canons. In other decisions, the proctor was deemed to have a mandate from those he represented, but even so it was a mandate which restricted his authority to the defence of their interests, the purposes for which they had, explicitly or implicitly, granted the authority.

What were the implications of Hostiensis’ — who had lectured on canon law and became a cardinal — adaptation of the idea of proctorship?

It may be that in this refinement of the proctorial concept is to be found an important link between the earlier medieval concept of representation as mere personification and the later idea, growing ever more explicit in the fourteenth century, that a true representative needed an actual delegation of authority from his community; for it was generally agreed among the canonists that the jurisdiction and administrative authority of a bishop were derived from election, not from consecration to the episcopal order.

Hostiensis’ reinterpretation reveals how rapidly a corporate understanding of society was eroding: representation was one thing, personification quite another.

Not only the claims of bishops but the claims of the heads of other legally constituted bodies increasingly came to be understood in terms of proctorship rather than ancient dominium. The idea of a ‘head’ thus ceased to convey an inherent and unquestionable superiority.

And if at first this reinterpretation of the Roman law notion of proctorship was applied only to parts of the church, the fourteenth century saw bolder thinkers begin to apply it to the church as a whole, with dramatic consequences for views of the papacy.

In effect, canon lawyers had encountered a problem which, centuries later, would come to haunt modern liberal democracy. The new understanding of society as an association of individuals – its ‘individuated’ image – could easily become a threat to the role of intermediate associations, located, that is, between the association ‘of all’ and the individual. The identification of a sovereign authority had a radical centralizing potential because it was a claim to speak for ‘all equally’. By identifying sovereign authority with universality – in the manner of popes Innocent III and Innocent IV – the autonomy of associations that were less than universal became problematic.

So the intellectual challenge which canonists faced was the need to reconcile their egalitarian moral intuitions with a defence of intermediate associations. How could the authority of such associations be made legitimate in the face of a sovereign agency representing, ex hypothesi, the claims of all? The canon lawyers developed a powerful response: an original theory about the nature of corporations, paving the way for a more general case for representative government in the church. They turned the moral intuitions that originally gave rise to the idea of sovereignty against ‘absolutist’ interpretations of the form of government it entailed.

Inadvertently, the canonists thereby laid another part of the foundation of modern liberal thought. They extended and refined earlier arguments about the difference between ownership and political authority, between ancient dominium and the right to rule. They did this by demonstrating that an egalitarian understanding of society implied by the idea of sovereignty dispersed moral authority in a way that was incompatible with the interpretation of papal authority as a form of ownership or dominium. The canonists appealed to the ideal of a church (‘the community of the faithful’) in which reason and freedom are dispersed against the assumption of unlimited authority by any human agency. This vision, in turn, provided the ‘deep’ moral foundation for constitutionalism in the church, for a formal dispersal of authority and power.
By the fourteenth century an increasing number of voices were calling for something like representative government in the church. Calls for reform focused on the role of general councils. Was not a general council of the church the supreme authority in matters concerning the faith and well being of the church? Did not the authority of such a council constrain even the pope’s ordinary jurisdiction, his claim to be the final judge and legislator of the church?

The struggle between Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair, which began in 1297, gave these questions a new urgency. The French king – urged on by many cardinals and Franciscans – appealed to a general council, contending that Boniface was a usurper (that is, that the resignation of his predecessor, Celestine V, was ‘forced’ and invalid) and a heretic. Ironically, both sides of the argument that followed drew on the new theory of corporations to make their case. The relationship between the papacy and church authorities – as well as papal relations with secular rulers asserting their sovereignty – came under unprecedented critical scrutiny.

Had the concentration of power as well as authority in the papacy created a monster? Philip the Fair’s resistance to the theocratic claims in Boniface’s bull, Unam Sanctam, drew the attention of the whole of Europe to constitutional issues. As a result, the papal attempt to submit all nations to its sovereign authority suffered a serious and lasting reverse, while within the church critics of the papacy gained in confidence. Stimulated by the new theory of corporations as well as their own interests, many bodies – not least the bishops and the college of cardinals – felt the need for a more collegiate governance of the church. They were ready to welcome a retreat from the ‘extravagant’ papal claims in the name of the ‘community of the faithful’. Thus, the absolutist version of papal authority was coming under threat even before the schism which created the conciliar movement.9

Late in the fourteenth century an extraordinary series of events gave such voices in the church not only an opportunity to express their views, but forced them to do so. In April 1378 the cardinals elected as pope the archbishop of Bari, who took the name of Urban VI. His conduct, however, soon led many cardinals to regret their decision, and a few months later they declared the election null and void. When Urban refused to accept their decision, the cardinals proceeded to elect a new pope, Clement VII. Neither ‘pope’ would give way to the other, and before long Clement established his own rival curia at Avignon. The previous decades, when popes had governed the church from Avignon, had greatly increased French influence in the curia. Clement gained French support, while the Italian cardinals supported Urban VI. The secular rulers of Europe responded differently to these rival claims of legitimacy, moved not least by national rivalries. Europe was torn apart by schism.

The constitutional question lurking in earlier canonist speculation suddenly became central and unavoidable. It drew attention to the possible role of a general council of the church, as offering far the most likely way of putting an end to schism.

By 1409 such a council, at Pisa, proceeded to depose both ‘popes’ and elect another, who styled himself Alexander V. The result, however, merely complicated the schism, with three contenders for the papal throne. Five years later the emperor Sigismund summoned another council at Constance. Its aim was no longer simply to end the schism, but to undertake a general reform of the church, to give the church what would amount to a constitution, clearly dispersing authority and power. The council comprised not only representatives of the secular clergy and the monastic orders, but also doctors of the new universities, who introduced a powerful voice in support of ‘conciliarism’, that is, regular meetings of general councils, to be recognized as the ultimate authority in the church.

This conciliar movement, drawing on canonist thinking and the writings of Ockham, won the support of some of Europe’s leading intellectuals. With growing confidence, the Council of Constance ‘proclaimed the indissolubility of the general council, and its superiority over the papal power; it undertook to make these principles prevalent in the church, and to reform the abuses which had crept into it, above all the exactions by which the court of Rome had procured supplies’.9 To achieve these ends, the Council of Constance appointed a commission of reform, drawing its members from across the orders and nations of the church.

At this point, however, the papal party rallied, insisting that such a comprehensive programme could not be carried out without the participation of the pope. So the rivals were finally induced to give way,
and a new pope, Martin V, was elected. However, his proposals for reform proved unsatisfactory to the council, which dissolved, not having achieved its programme. The meeting of a new council at Basle in 1431 met with no greater success. The papal party then brought about a rupture in the council by moving it to Italy, while the unrecognized partisans of reform remained at Basle.

By the mid-fifteenth century the papacy had – relying on the centralized administration that had been created since the twelfth century – regained control over the church. The project of reform which the church had failed to carry through did not die, however. The cause of church reform was almost immediately taken up by secular rulers who drew their own conclusions from the series of frustrated general councils and the resurgence of papal pretensions. The French king, in the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438), and the German empire, at the Diet of Mayence in 1439, introduced greater autonomy and more collegiate government into national churches. But even these national reforms championed by secular rulers were soon abandoned as a result of papal pressure and diplomacy, returning the situation in the church, at least in appearance, to one of papal absolutism.

But it was only an appearance. For the project of reform, which had eluded both the leaders of the church and secular rulers, had now taken root among the people.

Was it mere chance that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw such widespread popular agitation within the church, with Pietist movements in the Netherlands and Germany fostering a distrust of clerical authority, while the Lollards in England and the Hussites in Prague openly criticized the established church hierarchy, especially the papacy? In the eyes of John Wycliffe, leader of the Lollards, the church had lost its way, preoccupied with legal supremacy and the accumulation of wealth rather than the care of souls, its proper role. Wycliffe spoke for many across Europe when he called for translation of the scriptures into popular languages, so that they could be widely read and properly understood, giving people a basis for judging the claims of the clerical establishment. The understanding of ‘authority’ was taking a dramatic turn, away from aristocracy towards democracy.

Christian egalitarianism had already more than once fostered a kind of populism. But what is striking about movements in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is the way they combined the promotion of individual devotion through real knowledge of the scriptures with a deep-seated anti-clericalism. The belief that claims of authority had to make themselves both intelligible and acceptable to individual consciences was on the rise. That is why the programme of devolving authority and power within the church had exposed a popular need, even before the invention of printing added its ‘democratic’ influence. That is also why forcible repression of the Lollards and the Hussites was not the end of the story.

The fact that the Council of Constance condemned Huss and his associates as heretics cannot conceal a deep affinity between their projects. By defining a direction for reform of the church, the conciliarists had unleashed – only half-wittingly – what amounted to an impulse which could no longer be contained.

The popular reform of John Huss was for the instant stifled . . . But as the reforms of the councils had failed, as the end which they had pursued had not been attained, popular reform ceased not to ferment. It watched the first opportunity, and found it at the commencement of the sixteenth century. If the reform undertaken by the councils had been well carried out, the Reformation might have been prevented. But one or the other must have succeeded; their coincidence shows a necessity.10

These observations by François Guizot should give us pause to reflect. We have the advantage of far longer experience of European history, when considering consequences of the ‘failure’ of the conciliar movement.

How great a difference would the success of the conciliar movement have made to the future of Europe? Might it have preserved the unity of European Christianity? And how would that have affected the emergence of liberal secularism, often held to be the outcome of Protestantism? Would a united church that had adopted conciliarism – a decentralized church in which national churches and interests had freer play and greater influence – have developed with a form of secularism less strident and aggressive than the form which developed in post-Reformation Europe? These questions are fascinating, but finally
unanswerable. In any case, they should not be allowed to obscure the argument of this book: that in its basic assumptions, liberal thought is the offspring of Christianity. It emerged as the moral intuitions generated by Christianity were turned against an authoritarian model of the church.

The roots of liberalism were firmly established in the arguments of philosophers and canon lawyers by the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries: belief in a fundamental equality of status as the proper basis for a legal system; belief that enforcing moral conduct is a contradiction in terms; a defence of individual liberty, through the assertion of fundamental or ‘natural’ rights; and, finally, the conclusion that only a representative form of government is appropriate for a society resting on the assumption of moral equality.

These roots of liberalism were, however, dispersed in the fifteenth century. They had not yet been combined to create a coherent programme or theory for reform of the sovereign state, into what we have come to call ‘secularism’. That development awaited developments in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries – the Renaissance and the Reformation – when the fragmentation of Christianity led to religious wars, civil and international. In an attempt to restore a broken unity, Catholic and Protestant churches resorted to force. It was an appeal to force which led sensitive minds gradually to put together the credo of secularism, drawing on the insights of so-called ‘medieval’ thinkers.

Increasingly, the adjective ‘barbarous’ – which in earlier centuries had been applied by churchmen to the beliefs and practices of the tribes overrunning the Western Roman empire – would be reapplied to the attitudes and actions of the churches.

25

Dispensing with the Renaissance

If liberalism can be described as the child of Christianity, should it be called a ‘natural’ rather than a ‘legitimate’ child? There is good reason for thinking so. The reason is that liberalism as a coherent doctrine was not born willingly. It was certainly never a project of the church. Indeed, as a political theory it developed against the fierce resistance of the Catholic and even, for a long time, most Protestant churches. Its emergence was the result of a ‘civil war’ in early modern Europe, a war in which ‘liberal’ moral intuitions generated by Christianity were increasingly turned against attempts to ‘enforce’ belief.

The civil war has distorted our understanding of the relationship between liberalism and Christianity. And that is because the proto-liberal beliefs which had developed within the church by the fifteenth century – the belief in moral equality and a range of natural rights, in a representative form of government and the importance of freer enquiry – only came together when they were deployed against the church’s claim to have a right to ‘enforce’ belief, with the help of secular rulers.

Mounting opposition to that claim from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century – after the Reformation put an end to confessional unity in Europe – played a crucial part in the birth of modern liberalism. It shaped liberalism as a coherent doctrine directed against the idea of an authoritarian church, whether Catholic or Protestant. Liberalism became a doctrine which paved the way for a far more systematic separation of church and state – that is, for secularism. Indeed, the two terms became almost inseparable. Liberal secularism sought to limit the role of government through a structure of fundamental rights, rights that create and protect a sphere of individual
freedom, a private sphere. Religion thus became a matter for the private sphere, a matter of conscience. Liberal secularism sought to protect that private sphere, moreover, by means of constitutional arrangements that would disperse and balance powers in the state.

This profound moral and intellectual development did not take place overnight. It emerged by fits and starts over several hundred years. The story of its development—sixteenth-century natural rights theory, through the writings of Grotius and Hobbes, Locke and Montesquieu, to early nineteenth-century thinkers such as Constant, Tocqueville and J. S. Mill—has often been told. It is a story about what might be called the liberal ‘moment’ in European history.

Understandably, the story presents the development of liberal secularism largely in terms of opposition to ‘illegitimate’ claims of the church. Yet that is not the whole story. For the story often begins with what it calls a ‘rebirth’ rather than a ‘birth’. It begins with the Renaissance in Italy, the rediscovery of ancient ‘humanism’. And it presents the Renaissance as marking a decisive break with what had gone before in Europe.

The Renaissance is presented as the end of the middle ages, a crucial step in the process of individual liberation. We have inherited from historians such as Burckhardt the view that the individual re-emerged and burst into bloom in the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance is held to have marked the end of a kind of religious tyranny, a tyranny of the mind—opening European eyes to the apparently far wider range of values and interests exhibited in classical antiquity. And there can be no doubt that a passion for the ancient world did seize many minds.

In Burckhardt’s eloquent account, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian city-states witnessed the unabashed pursuit of fame, wealth and beauty, an inversion of values, a rehabilitation of self-assertion. Surrounded by physical remains of ancient cities, and themselves living in city-states, Italian humanists came to take as models of refined taste the achievements of antiquity in sculpture, painting, architecture and writing. This rebirth of humanism revealed man to himself, freeing him to explore new needs, create new ambitions and taste new pleasures. It fostered an unabashed enjoyment of this world, free of religious guilt.

While the earliest Italian humanists may have sought to merge Christian and ancient values, by the late fifteenth century humanists often displayed a contempt for the church. Machiavelli went further than most. He contrasted favourably the patriotism of the ancient citizen with the virtue of the Christian. Other humanists displayed impatience with the arid ‘scholastic’ preoccupations of the universities, with the ‘obscure’ arguments about logic and natural law pursued by canon lawyers and philosophers. Such arguments seemed to them too remote from human affairs, from real desires, needs and—not least—pleasures. Their preferred philosopher was Plato, whose dialogues conjured up a civilized, urban world rather than the austere monastic setting suggested by scholastic disputations about Aristotle.

If the Renaissance is understood as a first step towards liberal secularism because it began to throw off the shackles of religion authority, the next step identified is the growth of scepticism after the religious wars issuing from the Reformation, with their attempts to enforce uniformity of belief. This new scepticism—epitomized in the writings of Montaigne—fuelled anti-clericalism and calls for toleration. Such calls were soon made by invoking fundamental or ‘natural’ rights. The language of rights thus became integral to the growth of liberal secularism. The sphere of freedom defended in this way widened gradually until it included even atheism. By the eighteenth century anti-clericalism had become so virulent in parts of Europe that it led to an onslaught on religious belief as such. The result was that liberal secularism in Europe came to be understood as essentially anti-religious. Its roots were interpreted in that light, with the help of the idea of the Renaissance. Any suggestion that the roots might be traced to Christianity became outlandish.

Yet justifying the process of secularization—the separation of a private realm from the public sphere—was the distinction between outward conformity and inner, authentic belief. That distinction was based, in turn, on the conviction that freedom is a prerequisite of moral conduct, that moral obligation presupposes an area of choice. It was that conviction, after all, which had led to the ancient theory of natural law being recast as a doctrine of natural rights.

And that is the rub. For the conviction that uncoerced belief provides the true foundation for ‘legitimate’ authority was itself the product of
Christianity. It was the test of ‘internal acceptance’ that had gradually made ‘enforced belief’ a contradiction in terms, encapsulating reflections on the role of individual conscience by canon lawyers, theologians and philosophers from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. And as we have seen, their reflections rested on rejection of the assumption of natural inequality which had permeated ancient thinking. That is why presenting the process of secularization as a ‘rebirth’ of ancient humanism can be so misleading. For it ignores the moral conviction that led to the ancient theory of natural law being recast. It was that moral conviction which led to ‘rights’ becoming fundamental to the discourse of liberal secularism.

But an understanding of that connection was lost in the heat of early modern battles against the church. That is why we have to reconsider the view that the Renaissance marked a decisive break in European history, separating a period of ignorance and superstition (the ‘middle ages’) from one of freedom and progress.

The forms of ancient thought, feeling and expression that excited Italian humanists had sprung from and reflected an altogether different type of society: a society of citizens and slaves, of families rather than souls. This difference was often ignored by the humanists, many of whom were mostly interested in what we would call the ‘fine arts’. But ignoring this difference prevented them from exploring the deepest respects in which the ancient world differed from Christian Europe. Philosophical argument about ‘foundational’ moral assumptions was not to their taste. Italian humanists drew on the ancient world as a kind of quarry, without asking too much about its original structure.

To be fair, their eclecticism enabled humanists to mix ancient and ‘modern’ features in ways that are often very striking. But they are striking partly because they juxtapose elements drawn from utterly different types of society, from mind-sets resting on the contrary assumptions of natural inequality and moral equality. Yet the humanists were not immune to moral intuitions of their own society. Probably unconsciously, Renaissance painters turned the idealized types found in surviving ancient statuary into beautiful individuals. Take the treatment of male nudity. Italian painters transformed what had been a celebration of social superiority – of citizens’ muscular fitness to dominate their inferiors – into the graceful and touching figures we find, for example, in Botticelli. Botticelli’s figures look as if they might have a conscience!

So I am not suggesting that the Renaissance did not matter, that it did not channel human thought, feeling and expression into new forms. Nor am I suggesting that it has no place in understanding the development of sculpture, painting and architecture. That would be absurd. But what I am maintaining is that as an historiographical concept the Renaissance has been grossly inflated. It has been used to create a gap between early modern Europe and the preceding centuries – to introduce a discontinuity which is misleading.

If the fundamental feature of modernity is an individuated model of society – a model in which the individual rather than the family, clan or caste is the basic social unit – then it is important to distinguish that test from other criteria. Celebration of the Renaissance has confused the emergence of what is better called the pursuit of ‘individuality’ – an aesthetic notion – with the invention of the individual – a moral notion. This invention was the product of what philosophers call ‘ontological’ argument, argument about how reality is understood. And that was not the work of the humanists, though they too drew on its achievements. The humanists did introduce a new emphasis on cultivating the self, on the refinement of taste and self-expression. This was an emphasis that shaped what might be called the cult of individuality, depicting the individual as the ‘victim’ of social pressures and heroism as resistance to such pressures. Social institutions were presented as a threat to the self.

This new sensibility contributed to developments in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophy and political theory which are often ‘held against’ liberalism. They encouraged an ‘atomized’ picture of the world, separating the individual from a social context and obscuring the normative developments which had led to the emergence of liberalism. A kind of ‘physicalism’ did, it is true, invade liberal thinking during these centuries. It was reinforced by developments in the physical sciences which placed the individual mind in nature rather than culture, making the test of valid knowledge observable regularities rather than social norms. The philosophical tradition we call utilitarianism turned this into an ‘atomized’ model of society,
a model in which individual wants or preferences are taken as given, with little interest in the role of norms or the socializing process.

There is good reason for considering these later intellectual developm ents as a liberal heresy, because it deprives liberal secularism of its profoundly moral roots, cutting it off from the tradition of discourse which had generated it. Yet liberalism rests on the moral assumptions provided by Christianity. It preserves Christian ontology without the metaphysics of salvation.

We have found that the 'deep' foundation for the individual as the organizing social role – a status which broke the chains of family and caste – was laid by lawyers, theologians and philosophers from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. Their picture of reality gave individual conscience and intentions, the moral life of the individual, a foundational role. Let us recall just one example. Through innovations in thirteenth-century canon law, corporations came to be understood as associations of individuals, ceasing to have an identity radically independent of and superior to that of their members. A freer spirit and the sense that institutions could be reshaped owed more than a little to the demolition of that older, reified meaning of corporation. This was no atomized individualism. Self-reliance and the habit of association were joined.

The view that the Renaissance and its aftermath marked the advent of the modern world – the end of the 'middle ages' – is mistaken. By the fifteenth century canon lawyers and philosophers had already asserted that 'experience' is essentially the experience of individuals, that a range of fundamental rights ought to protect individual agency, that the final authority of any association is to be found in its members, and that the use of reason when understanding processes in the physical world differs radically from normative or a priori reasoning. These are the stuff of modernity.

As we have seen, these elements were still 'free-standing' in the fifteenth century. They had not yet been fused together in a coherent and militant programme. But even in the absence of such a programme, these elements began to spread from the clerical elite into university education and affect popular attitudes. In doing so, they sharpened egalitarian moral intuitions that were to be turned against an authori-
THE BIRTH PANGS OF MODERN LIBERTY

By the fifteenth century, this new image of society as an association of individuals was breaking through the surface of European life. It was a blurred image, doubtless more blurred in some areas than in others. It was more distinct in the commercial, urbanized areas, less distinct in rural areas of southern Europe than in the north. But even in "backward" rural areas, the decline of serfdom and the growth of market economies projected the image to some extent. Increased social mobility – abetted by a scarcity of labour after the Black Death – eased the way for intellectual changes ‘carried’ by this new image of society. So did the centralizing of authority by national monarchs in France, England and Spain. The envy felt by many Italian humanists, when they compared this with the failure of attempts to unify Italy, is indirect evidence of the impact of this new image of society.

But there is more direct evidence of the impact. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe, fundamental changes can be seen in several spheres: in attitudes towards the self, in attitudes towards the natural world, and in attitudes towards government. Let us look briefly at each.

First is the extraordinary emphasis on ‘innerness’ which suddenly marked popular religious movements across Europe. Being guided by an ‘inner light’ became the almost standard form of aspiration. It was as if individuals, glimpsing a world in which differences of status and social roles might no longer be assigned at birth, felt the need for a more secure moral foundation – something that would not fail them. For when personal identity cannot be exhausted by the roles an individual ‘occupies’, where can that individual look for support?

Emphasis on the mystical union of God and the individual soul – famously asserted by Meister Eckhart, for whom ‘the creature exists only by and though God’ as creator – became a leitmotiv among the German and the Dutch pietists, as well as among the followers of Wycliffe in England and Huss in Prague. Religion understood merely as ritual practice came under growing threat. The conviction that religion meant nothing when it did not transform the feelings and motives of the individual was expressed memorably by Thomas à Kempis, who belonged to a Dutch movement called the Brethren of the Common Life and wrote the Imitation of Christ: ‘I desire to feel compunction rather than to know its definition . . .’

340

DISPENSING WITH THE RENAISSANCE

The emphasis on innerness, on something felt, contributed to a new kind of humility and a revaluation of the role of the mind: ‘A humble rustic who serves God is certainly better than a proud philosopher who, neglecting himself, considers the movement of the heavens.’ The revealing phrase here is ‘neglecting himself’.

The disciplining of the self was becoming the primary moral imperative. Reason could not simply command feelings. That conviction – with its roots in Paul and Augustine – stood in contrast to the ambitions of theologians who had sought to capture Christian beliefs within the structure of ancient rationalism. For the pietists, a personal relationship with God was the fundamental experience open to every individual, the true source of morality. It was the relationship which should inform all others. ‘God is in all creatures . . . and yet he is above them.’ Transforming feeling was more than the mind on its own could accomplish. It would be a mistake to call this pietist response anti-intellectual, however. For these popular movements laid great emphasis on self-discipline, through education and reading the scriptures. What they pointed out, though, were the limits of the mind in shaping moral action. Their emphasis on a devoted life and on the role of grace was a warning against the pride of the intellect. Work and daily dedication should be the companions of study. ‘Virtue then became a matter of practice.

A thinker like Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris in 1395, deemed individual moral agency – rather than the systems of theologians over-impressed by the achievements of ancient philosophy – to be the introduction to God. Gerson considered that the concept of God elaborated by theologians such as Aquinas, seeking to emulate Aristotle, had departed from the God proclaimed by Paul, the biblical God who spoke through Abraham and the prophets, before taking on human form in the Christ. For the biblical God was a God who transformed motives and action. The experience of such a God was always available to those with faith. And that experience of motives transformed was just as real as experience of the physical world.

This remarkable upsurge of emphasis on ‘innerness’ led to a preoccupation with the will. Here the direction taken by popular opinion parallels that taken by philosophical argument during the same period. We have seen that the criticisms levelled at Aquinas by Duns Scotus and Ockham amounted to a rejection of Thomism in the name
of God's freedom. Aquinas' conception of natural law seemed to entail that God could not have chosen or acted other than the way he did. For Aquinas, natural law consisted of rational principles that governed God's will as well as the human will. For Duns Scotus and Ockham, however, that position both threatened divine omnipotence and misunderstood role of reason. They saw God's will as limited only by his free nature. And it was God's will, revealed in the Christian faith, that humans should be equal and free agents. Thus, freedom became the bond between God and man. God, not any 'necessary' dictates of reason, created our world. Reason is a part of creation. But reason by itself is not the creator.

Here we meet the second fundamental change, for this revised view of the role of reason had other important consequences. It helped to reshape understanding of the physical world. It created a sharper distinction between an inner, moral life—'wrestling' with the will—and the processes of the physical world. That emerges clearly in the direction taken by thought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For these centuries witnessed the almost irresistible spread of Ockham's nominalist philosophy across Europe, sending down deep roots in the universities, where it competed with 'official' Thomism. At Paris, Oxford, Heidelberg, Prague and Cracow, nominalism became ascendant. Those who defended more 'realist' philosophical positions—the 'ancient way' rather than the 'modern way'—even sought at times, in desperation, to ban the teaching of nominalism.

Ockham's emphasis on individual experience and observation as the only legitimate basis of empirical or 'probable' knowledge had distinguished such knowledge from deductive or 'demonstrative' truth, which did not provide factual knowledge of the world. This separation of two forms of knowledge worked against metaphysical speculation, in particular, 'natural' theology. For Ockham, the natural world became instead something to be investigated, in a search for the causes of things. The causes of external events could not, he held, be discovered by a priori reasoning, which produced certainty only in the sense that it drew the consequences of its own assumptions and definitions. This separation of contingent from formal truth created a threshold for much freer thinking. It was a spur to curiosity about the natural world of experience.

Followers of Ockham pursued this separation of two types of reasoning, and rejected 'realist' positions which clung to the belief that a structure of the universe knowable by reason alone could be identified. We have already encountered Ockham's attack on the misuse of definitions, taking as premises terms such as 'final cause', which correspond to nothing that is verifiable. Thus, Ockham's insistence on the difference between reasons and causes, the latter turning on observable sequences of events, liberated enquiry about the natural world by providing the conceptual basis for distinguishing 'nature' from 'society'. This was a death blow to traditional teleological thinking, for it separated norms and the conditions of human action from the requirements for explaining external, physical events.

So it was no accident that, by the fourteenth century, previous understanding of the physical world had come under review in the universities. A newly critical approach to Aristotle's physics developed, an approach which noticed anomalies in the theory by relying on direct observation. The first response was to introduce additional assumptions to account for the anomalies and 'rescue' Aristotelian theory. Yet the multiplication of such assumptions in order to 'save appearances' gradually raised doubts about the fundamental assumption on which Aristotelian theory was based, that everything in the universe tends to find a resting place, its purpose or 'final cause'.

Ockham's Razor—the principle that the best explanation is one that does not multiply assumptions needlessly—took its toll of confidence in Aristotle's physical theory. Aristotle's assumption that everything has a rightful 'place' had sprung from the ancient natural law tradition, with its underlying assumption of inequality. Thus, Aristotle had distinguished 'natural' from 'unnatural' motion (for example, throwing a stone upwards, when it 'naturally' falls). Ockham rejected this distinction, suggesting instead something like the idea of inertia. Stimulated by Ockham's arguments, his followers Nicholas Oresme, Pierre d'Ailly and Jean Buridan developed an account of motion in terms of impetus: the energy given to an object by its mover.

The idea that motion was as fundamental as rest in 'nature' was emerging. By the fourteenth century, it had begun to subvert the ancient model of the cosmos. Buridan, for example, applied the theory
of impetus to argue that it could explain the movement of heavenly bodies in precisely the same way that it accounted for the movement of bodies on earth: ‘There is no need to suppose that the heavenly bodies are made of a special element (the quintessence or fifth element) which can only move with a circular motion. Nor is it necessary to postulate Intelligences of the spheres to account for the spheres’ movements.’ Thus, Buridan abandoned the assumption that heavenly bodies have a superior nature – the usual assumption of ancient teleology – and that their role springs from a higher intelligence (‘the music of the spheres’) than any available on earth. ‘Motion on earth and motion in the heavens can be explained in the same way.’ It is as if the moral intuitions behind social levelling on earth were being applied to the celestial sphere. There was no need to postulate ‘aristocracy’ in nature!

Oresme was even bolder than Buridan. He called into question another basic ancient assumption – the assumption that while the heavens move, the earth itself is stationary. ‘I conclude that one could not show by any experience that the heaven was moved with a daily motion and that the earth was not moved in this way.’ Altogether, fourteenth-century physical theories reveal how understanding of the physical world began to profit from abandoning the assumption of natural inequality.

Let us now look at a third series of changes revealing the impact of the new image of society. This series was political rather than moral or scientific. The question hanging over Europe by the fifteenth century was this: how would it be organized as feudal institutions eroded? Feudalism had not sent down the same roots everywhere. It was never as strong in Italy or in southern France, as in the north of France or Germany. The Italian city-states or republics, together with the cities of Flanders and Catalonia, suggested a different basis for political organization than the feudal north, while in England, still another model was on offer, that of a royal power traditionally stronger than the leading feudatories.

The outstanding political fact of fifteenth-century Europe was the centralizing of authority and power by monarchs seeking to leave feudal constraints behind and become ‘sovereigns’ properly so called. Louis XI of France, Henry VII of England and Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain all took remarkable steps in that direction. Why did they have such success? How did they overcome the resistance of other institutions? For they certainly met with resistance. In effect, there were four institutions which might have provided a model for the political organization of Europe: feudalism, the church, the boroughs and monarchy.

However, after the frustration of the theocratic ambitions of Innocent IV and Boniface VIII, neither the feudal nobility nor the cities were able to shape the political organization of Europe. By the fourteenth century, it was clear that feudal ‘law’ could not provide the basis for a stable political system. Its incoherence and constant reliance on force made that impossible. Yet at the same time the feudal nobility was strong enough to prevent anything like the generalizing of ‘republican’ civic institutions. That was a development improbable in any case, for the burghers of the cities lacked wider political ambitions. In the face of the feudal nobility, burghers exhibited a sense of inferiority. Fierce as they were if it was a question of defending their own boroughs, they had no vision of a republican organization for society at large, though the Netherlands was perhaps an exception.

So there was a stand-off. Before the triumph of monarchy, however, there was a last quasi-feudal attempt to organize Europe. It took the form of bringing together the representatives of these different institutions with a view to their cooperating, while retaining their original character. Thus, awareness of centralizing pressures led to the creation of assemblies which sought to reflect and organize the diversity of European institutions – the Estates-General in France, the English Parliament, the Cortes of Spain and an Imperial Diet in Germany. These assemblies were organized according to rank, with the nobility, clergy and burghers each in their assigned place.

But these attempts at national organization – with the signal exception of England’s Parliament (which benefited from a stronger crown) – failed. The assemblies were too heterogeneous. While the feudal nobles were accustomed to exercising political will, neither the clergy nor the representatives of the boroughs were used to direct political power, and they had little taste for it, fearing new taxes. As a result, these assemblies failed to become effective instruments of government.
But these assemblies did not fail merely because of their diversity, their clinging to traditional privileges. There was a deeper reason. It was because the new idea of a ‘sovereign’ authority vested in monarchs projected a different image of society, an egalitarian image which now had a popular resonance that it had previously lacked. The appeal of royalty released and reinforced new aspirations. Popular attitudes had changed enough to deprive the traditional corporate model of society of its legitimacy. That is why ‘equal subjection’ to a sovereign was perceived not as loss but as gain. So we have to be careful when speaking of the ‘triumph’ of royalty in the fifteenth century. For, indirectly, it was also the triumph of moral intuitions generated by the church.

The task of organizing Europe fell to monarchy because its way had been prepared by the church. It was not merely that the royal ambition to acquire a sovereign authority had been shaped by the papal revolution. At the deepest level— the moral and intellectual level—the church had won the struggle for the future of Europe. The church had projected the image of society as an association of individuals, an image which unleashed the centralizing process in Europe.

Of course, monarchs were not disinterested exponents of an egalitarian form of society. They rapidly came to understand how much they stood to gain in power from the centralizing of legal authority. For them, the prospect of subduing leading feudal magnates and controlling the church within their realms was as important as moral considerations generated by Christian beliefs—often far more important. Nonetheless, unintended consequences overtook the monarchs. In the process of centralizing laws, manners and ideas—funding a single society out of what had been separate, parochial societies—the monarchs not only created states, but also the foundation for a ‘public’ or ‘national’ opinion. The partial emergence of national opinions in the fifteenth century provides further evidence of the impact of the new image of society as an association of individuals.

How was this manifest? The prestige of royalty grew because royal power became the symbol of social progress, the abolition of privilege through ‘equal subjection’. The Third Estate in France or the ‘Commons’ in England were at times prepared to sacrifice even local self-government in order to destroy feudal privilege. The creation of a ‘sovereign’ agency seemed far the most important objective. This was the pattern that marked the growth of royal power, especially in France. But across Europe it invested royalty with a kind of idealism. Equal subjection to a sovereign was seen as developing at the expense of subordinations based on ‘mere’ custom.

It would be a mistake therefore to see only the tyrannical potential of the growth of sovereign authorities, that royal ‘absolutism’ which came to the fore during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For it contained the seeds of individual liberty. By claiming a monopoly of legal authority, sovereigns deprived many traditional attitudes and practices of legal status. What royal commands did not positively enjoin or forbid, defined—at least potentially—a sphere of choice and personal freedom.

Of course, full awareness of the model of society entailed by the claim of ‘sovereignty’ did not develop overnight. Even the late sixteenth-century French theorist of sovereignty Jean Bodin wavered over the nature of the unit of subordination entailed by the claim. Yet the time of Thomas Hobbes, in the next century, the distinctive nature of the claim to a sovereign authority was made clear, not least by Hobbes’s referring to sovereigns as secular deities.

There is one final, formidable piece of evidence about ‘inventing the individual’ available. It comes from what remains the most reliable source about social change, language itself. If we look at the word ‘individual’ in historical dictionaries of the English or French languages, we will find that it first became current in the fifteenth century. The word ‘state’, with its stipulation of a sovereign authority, became current at about the same time. And that is no accident, for the meanings of these two words depend upon each other. It was through the creation of states that the individual was invented as the primary or organizing social role.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that we often find the motives and actions of Europeans by the fifteenth century easier to understand—more familiar and more ‘modern’. The kind of means/end rationality or thinking that we associate with market relations was emerging clearly, even to the point of caricature in the calculations of Louis XI and Henry VII. That is because the beliefs and institutions shaping action were changing dramatically.
THE BIRTH PANGS OF MODERN LIBERTY

It would not be long before Cervantes was able to parody as illusions the motives and patterns of behaviour belonging to a hierarchical society that no longer existed, while Shakespeare could create human characters by plumbing the depths below the social roles they happened to occupy. Christian egalitarianism had prepared this revolution in the structure of society. Social positions could no longer be regarded as 'fated' or inescapable.

This was the secular translation of the Christian idea of the 'soul'. And we are living with its consequences even now.

Epilogue: Christianity and Secularism

Like other cultures, Western culture is founded on shared beliefs. But, in contrast to most others, Western beliefs privilege the idea of equality. And it is the privileging of equality – of a premiss that excludes permanent inequalities of status and ascriptions of authoritative opinion to any person or group – which underpins the secular state and the idea of fundamental or 'natural' rights. Thus, the only birthright recognized by the liberal tradition is individual freedom.

Christianity played a decisive part in this. Yet the idea that liberalism and secularism have religious roots is by no means widely understood. Evidently, the separation of church and state – the first great objective of the liberal tradition – has itself drawn attention away from these roots of secularism. But so too has a 'civil war' that long raged in Europe, and may now be spreading to the United States. What is this civil war? It is a war in which religious belief and 'godless' secularism are understood as irreconcilable opponents, an understanding that was long fed by memories of the burning of Protestant 'martyrs' in sixteenth-century England, by the legend of the Spanish Inquisition and by a 'holy alliance' between churches (especially the Roman Catholic Church) and socially conservative forces in reaction to the French Revolution.

Those memories may have dimmed, but the perception of profound conflict between secularism and religious belief has been reawakened and taken a new form in Western societies recently. In Europe, massive immigration and the growth of large Muslim minorities have widened the range of non-Christian beliefs dramatically. And such beliefs have consequences. Quite apart from the acts of terrorism which invoke – more or less dubiously – the name of Islam, Muslims
An overriding temptation for many eighteenth-century historians was to present the ancient world as 'secular,' in that way providing a point of contrast with European states in which the role of the church and of the clergy was contested and being redefined. In Protestant countries this had long been underway, but by the eighteenth century even Catholic countries were involved, as the expulsion of the Jesuits from several of them reveals.

Understanding the ancient world as secular — with citizens free from the oppression of priests as a privileged, dogmatic church — became an important weapon in the arsenal of political argument. In the same way, achieving a clerical regime in which thought was stilled not by superstition and clerical self-interest, but by religious tolerance, was a weapon in the arsenal of the liberal political regime. Whatever the case, the account of anarchy as 'secular' first. The trouble was that this account was itself a religious cult, with the further as its high priest, the family altar and its 'sacred flame.' This made it impossible to explain the origins of the family and its role in the social order. The family was, at least originally, a self-contained moral universe. It did not seek or welcome any deep or moral connection with the outside world. In time, this kind of hermetic family cult was altered only to the extent that the bond of association constituted the city was itself a religious one.

In fact, the relationship of families and tribes, each defined by a shared worship of ancestors. Little wonder, then, that the

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formation of a city required the emergence of a new cult or worship, through discovery of a 'hero' as founder of the city. As the family had its gods, and the tribe its gods, so the city had to become the domain of gods, its 'protecting deities'.

So instead of an antiquity free of religion, priesthood and superstition – a 'secular' inspiration for modern Europe – we find on closer examination that the family, tribe and city were each a kind of church. Each had its own rites, a worship with very elaborate requirements. 'Faith and purity of intention counted for very little, and the religion consisted entirely in the minute practice of innumerable rules . . .' Because of that, the constant fear in each association was that some detail of ritual requirement might be neglected and the god of the association offended. Hence the need for frequent rites of purification and expiation. These became the duties of the civic magistrates in both Greece and Rome.

Altogether, the most distinctive thing about Greek and Roman antiquity is what might be called 'moral enclosure', in which the limits of personal identity were established by the limits of physical association and inherited, unequal social roles. This moral enclosure is illustrated by the Greek term describing anyone who sought to live outside such associations and such roles: such a person was called an 'idior'.

More than anything else, I think, Christianity changed the ground of human identity. It was able to do that because of the way it combined Jewish monotheism with an abstract universalism that had roots in later Greek philosophy. By emphasizing the moral equality of humans, quite apart from any social roles they might occupy, Christianity changed 'the name of the game'. Social rules became secondary. They followed and, in a crucial sense, had to be understood as subordinate to a God-given human identity, something all humans share equally. Thus, humans were to live in 'two cities' at the same time.

We can see this breaking out of moral enclosure everywhere in the New Testament. In particular, we can glimpse the merger of Judaism and Greek philosophy in St Paul's conception of the Christ, a conception remarkable for its universalism. For Paul, the love of God revealed in the Christ imposes opportunities and obligations on the individual as such, that is, on conscience. The Christ thus becomes the medium of a new and transformed humanity. In one sense, Paul's conception of the Christ introduces the individual, by giving conscience a universal dimension. Was Paul the greatest revolutionary in human history?

Through its emphasis on human equality, the New Testament stands out against the primary thrust of the ancient world, with its dominant assumption of 'natural' inequality. Indeed, the atmosphere of the New Testament is one of exhilarating detachment from the unthinking constraints of inherited social roles. Hence Paul's frequent references to 'Christian liberty'. This was not simply an opposition to the Jewish law. It was a fulfilment, made possible by the discovery of a ground for existence antecedent to inherited social rules and roles. This is the moral atmosphere revealed when Jesus restricts even the claims of the family if the service of God requires it, something which churches have since often toned down.

In contrast to some later Hellenic philosophy, the New Testament assertion of a basic human equality ceased to be a speculative stripping away of social conventions, an exercise which had at times served chiefly to demonstrate the superiority of the philosopher to local prejudice. Instead, this stripping away revealed the need for a moral response to the individual freedom implied by equal standing in the eyes of God. Jesus' insistence that 'the kingdom of God is within you' (as the early church often proclaimed) was designed to invoke such a response, to create an individual will. Thus, to earlier speculations about equality, the New Testament added the duty of reciprocity – the obligation 'to love thy neighbour as thyself'.

That is why I argued in an earlier book, Democracy in Europe (2000), that the Christian conception of God provided an ontological foundation for the individual, first as a moral status, and then, centuries later, as the primary social role. 'The interiority of Christian belief – its insistence that the quality of personal intentions is more important than any fixed social rules – was a reflection of this. Rule following – the Hebraic “law” – was downgraded in favour of action governed by conscience. In that way, the Christian conception of God provided the foundation for what became an unprecedented form of human society.' Christian moral beliefs emerge as the ultimate source of the social revolution that has made the West what it is.

In Democracy in Europe, I suggested an analogy to understand
what Christian beliefs introduced into the world. It is an analogy with an argument in Marxism – the distinction Marx drew between a ‘class in itself’ and a ‘class for itself’. Marx meant that a class could exist objectively – identified by income or occupation – without necessarily having any consciousness of itself as a class. He illustrated this by contrasting medieval peasants with the townspeople or burghers, the ‘bourgeoisie’, who became conscious of themselves as a class by struggling against feudal privileges. So I then applied this distinction to the role of Christianity.

Christianity took humanity as a species in itself and sought to convert it into a species for itself. Thus, the defining characteristic of Christianity was its universalism. It aimed to create a single human society, a society composed, that is, of individuals rather than tribes, clans or castes. The fundamental relationship between the individual and his or her God provides the crucial test, in Christianity, of what really matters. It is, by definition, a test which applies to all equally. Hence the deep individualism of Christianity was simply the reverse side of its universalism. The Christian conception of God became the means of creating the brotherhood of man, of bringing to self-consciousness the human species, by leading each of its members to see him or herself as having, at least potentially, a relationship with the deepest reality – viz., God – that both required and justified the equal moral standing of all humans.

This was the revolutionary promise of Christian beliefs.

It is hardly too much to claim that this framework of ideas provided the original constitution of Europe. It is a framework that can be glimpsed as early as Augustine’s famous work, the *City of God*. For Augustine, following Paul, belief in the moral equality of men created a role for conscience, and that set limits to the claims of any social organization. This is the source of the dualism that has distinguished Christian thinking about society and government, a preoccupation with the different claims of the sacred and the secular spheres. It rests on the conviction that we ought to recognize and respect the difference between inner conviction and external conformity, a distinction which would not have served any function or perhaps even been intelligible in much of the ancient world.

But if Christian beliefs provided the ontological foundation for the individual as a moral status and primary social role, why did the latter take more than a millennium to develop? We should not be surprised by this fact. There were many other causes at work. The implications of moral intuitions generated by Christianity had to be worked out against prejudices and practices sometimes as old as the social division of labour. That, in turn, involved learning how to create and protect a public role for conscience, first of all by forging a conceptual framework that could be deployed to criticize existing social practices. It was something that took centuries. And it involved fierce controversy, frequent back-tracking and frustration. It is that process we have been examining.

We do not have to suppose that the process was always self-conscious. Nonetheless, outstanding minds among the clergy clung to one framework of ideas, even during what I have called the ‘schizophrenic’ Carolingian period, when there was an unstable mixture of ancient and Christian thought and practice. The framework emerges in the voice of a leading Carolingian churchman, Agobard, the archbishop of Lyons:

There is neither Gentile nor Jew, Scythian nor Aquitanian, nor Lombard, nor Burgundian, nor Alaman, nor bond, nor free. All are one in Christ . . . Can it be accepted that opposed to this unity which is the work of God, there should be an obstacle in the diversity of laws in one and the same country, in one and the same city, and in one and the same house? It constantly happens that of five men walking or sitting side by side, no two have the same terrestrial law, although at root – on the eternal plane – they belong to Christ.

In this urgent voice from the early ninth century we can still hear the moral heart of Christianity beating beneath the surface of social conventions.

This brings us to another historical ‘moment’. For just as modern historical writing has often underestimated the role of religion in the ancient world, so it has failed to draw attention to a remarkable development during the so-called ‘middle ages’. This was the moment when the idea of natural rights emerged and began to provide a new conceptual tool for criticizing established social beliefs and practices,
including, eventually, even the church as an institution. Historians of social and political thought have usually located such a moment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This 'early modern' period is the period when it is conventional to say that the doctrines of liberalism and secularism first raised their heads, not least because of the needs of nation-states struggling with bitter confessional conflicts arising from the Reformation.

The conventional interpretation also relates the emergence of liberalism and secularism to a new scepticism bred by the interest in and sympathy with antiquity. The increasingly sceptical turn taken by the humanist movement at the end of the fifteenth century saw a writer like Machiavelli draw on Roman sources when interpreting the events of his own time, an interpretation that gave less attention to Christian beliefs and more attention to the failures of the church as an institution. Borrowing the idea of an inexorable historical cycle drove out worries about individual salvation. Corruption of the citizenry, their loss of civic spirit, came to seem more important than the Christian idea of virtue. The clergy, suspected of manipulating beliefs to their own advantage, were often charged with 'weakening' the citizens' valour.

So humanism became increasingly associated with anti-clericalism, at about the same time as religious wars resulting from the Reformation provided further motive for secular authorities to intervene, in order to establish a framework that might contain the violence unleashed by confessional differences. Taken together, these trends suggested that the emergent secularism or proto-liberalism had little to do with the moral intuitions generated by Christianity, but rather that their inspiration should be located in antiquity and paganism. Suddenly, 'superstition' was associated more with the church than with paganism.

The trouble with this view is that it ignores the fact that, by the fifteenth century, there was already operating in Europe a theory of justice that did, indeed, have roots in ancient 'pagan' philosophy. But it was a doctrine that had for several centuries been reshaped by Christian moral intuitions — by, put most simply, the golden rule of 'doing unto others what you would have them do unto you', with its strikingly egalitarian underpinnings. That doctrine was the doctrine of natural law. Long before the fifteenth century it had been revived and revised by canon lawyers in the universities of Bologna, Padua, Paris and Oxford.

How was this doctrine revised? It was revised, as we have seen, by being turned into a theory of natural rights, rights which belong to the individual as such, rights which are in that sense pre-social and ought to serve as a criterion of legitimate social organization. Drawing on Roman law, and under the patronage of the papacy, canon lawyers from the late eleventh century began to create a system of law for Christians founded on the assumption of moral equality. This system was to privilege the conception of what has been called 'subjective rights', that is, rights inhering in the individual, starting with the claim to freedom. That claim amounted to a rejection of the ancient assumption of natural inequality.

Brian Tierney shrewdly observes that 'the idea of subjective rights has become central to our political discourse, but we still have no idea of the origin and early development of the idea'. Tierney argues that Gratian's Decretum and its impact on the twelfth- and thirteenth-century canonists is the correct point of departure, quoting the first words of the Decretum: 'The human race is ruled by two (means) namely by natural law and by usages. Natural law is what is contained in the law and the Gospel by which each is commanded to do to another what he wants done to himself and forbidden to do to another what he does not want done to himself.' Tierney shows how canonists following Gratian constantly moved between two senses of the word jus — between jus understood as objective law (whether divine or human in origin) and jus understood as individual subjective right:

A decisive shift of meaning and emphasis occurred in the twelfth century. For some of the Stoics and for Cicero there was a force in man through which he could discern jus naturale, the objective natural law that pervaded the whole universe, but for the canonists jus naturale itself could be defined as a subjective force or faculty or power or ability inherent in human persons.

Where the Stoics had construed natural law to refer to a cosmic order of things, the canonists of the twelfth century construed it to mean free will or power, an 'area of licit choice' for individuals justified by the nature of human agency.
Thus, by the twelfth century a sense of *jus* was emerging that was not far removed from the modern sense of a right. There is no need for us here to go again into the complicated story of how the doctrine of natural rights developed from Gratian to Ockham and beyond. For our purposes, as Voltaire said about the miracle of St Denis (who, after being decapitated, picked up his head and walked away), it is ‘only the first step that is difficult’.

Why have these origins of the theory of natural rights not been appreciated sooner? The answer, I suspect, turns on the hostility shown by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists to what was going on in the universities of their day. The blanket condemnation of ‘scholasticism’ (understood as an obsession with Aristotle and logic) led to quite different forms of enquiry being bundled together and confused. Theology, civil and canon law, logic and physical theory suffered under the same term of opprobrium, which became a stock-in-trade of eighteenth-century historical writing.

Yet we can now see that not only did an identification of anomalies in Aristotelian physical theory in the universities pave the way for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century revolution in physics, but the origins of natural rights language which became central to modern political discourse can also be traced back to innovations in canon law during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The identity of the individual – of a status which creates a space for the legitimate exercise of personal judgement and will – had broken through the surface of social life by the fifteenth century. Equality was no longer consigned to the arrangements of ‘another world’, to an afterlife in which unjustifiable (that is, in the sight of God) inequalities of status and treatment would disappear. The papal claim of sovereignty, embodied in a legal system founded on the assumption of moral equality, had thus achieved more than the papacy either imagined or intended. It had generated a new conception of society, a conception which had, in turn, created unprecedented moral needs in the population at large. That is the most striking thing about the fifteenth century. Such needs were seizing the popular mind. They took the form of new claims in both the religious and secular spheres, claims anticipating the Reformation.

What at least some of the conciliarists grasped was that the moral intuitions generated by Christianity were transforming the traditional idea of ‘authority’. Embodied in the legal system created by canonists, and inspiring secular rulers to create comparable systems based on the claims to ‘sovereignty’, the introduction of an underlying equality of status – the invention of the individual – was turning the source of authority upside down. Increasingly it was to be found ‘below’, in human agency and conscience, rather than ‘above’ in coercive eternal ideas.

Why is all this important? It reveals how Christian moral intuitions played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse that gave rise to modern liberalism and secularism. Indeed, the pattern by which liberalism and secularism developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century resembles nothing so much as the stages through which canon law developed from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. The sequence of argument is quite extraordinarily similar. The canonists, so to speak, ‘got there first’.

The sequence began with insistence on equality of status, moved on to the assertion of a range of basic human rights, and concluded with the case for self-government. Thus, from Hobbes’s insistence on basic human equality, in preparation for defining sovereignty in terms of ‘equal subjection’, through Locke’s defence of human freedom by identifying a range of natural rights, to Rousseau’s making the case for the sovereignty of the people and self-government, each of these three steps in modern political thought had its counterpart in the evolution of medieval canon law.

To be sure, there remains an important difference between the two traditions of thought. The Pauline moral source is frequently asserted in canon law, whereas developing liberal thought often conflated assumptions about God and nature. As the historian Carl Becker once remarked, in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) the eighteenth century ‘denatured God and deified nature’. The foundation for the claim to liberty became ‘human nature’ and personal conscience. Yet the conception of human agency relied upon – and elaborated by the great philosopher Immanuel Kant at the end of the eighteenth century – continued to have a markedly Christian impress.

What, then, has led to a ‘war’ between religion and secularism, a struggle which can plausibly be called a ‘civil war’ because of the
moral roots shared by the two sides? Why do Europeans feel happier referring to the role of ancient Greece and Rome than to the role of the church in the formation of their culture? The answer can be found in the way secularism has come to be understood – and misunderstood – in Europe.

Attitudes towards secularism were shaped by anti-clericalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The French Revolution, in particular, had a decisive effect on attitudes. It created two hostile camps. On the one hand were followers of Voltaire, who sought to écraser l’infâme, as they described the authoritarian and privileged church of the ancien régime. On the other hand were those, such as Joseph de Maistre, who saw the separating of church and state as nothing less than an ‘insurrection’ against God, public denial of beliefs which had shaped Europe.

Of course, the last two hundred years have overlaid the hostility between the two camps. The religious camp has come, by and large, to accept civil liberty and religious pluralism. The anti-clericals have – with the exception of hardline Marxists and writers such as Richard Dawkins – given up on the attempt to extirpate religious belief. But the old antagonism still lurks under the surface. The visceral reaction of the French left to the prospect of acknowledging the Christian roots of Europe has its counterpart in much church rhetoric deploiring the growth of ‘Godless’ secularism. Even Benedict XVI, a most learned pope, was not free of this habit. He called for an understanding between religions in order to ‘combat’ secularism.

This is Europe’s undeclared ‘civil war’. And it is as tragic as it is unnecessary. It is tragic because, by identifying secularism with non-belief, with indifference and materialism, it deprives Europe of moral authority, playing into the hands of those who are only too anxious to portray Europe as decadent and without conviction. It is unnecessary because it rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of secularism. Properly understood, secularism can be seen as Europe’s noblest achievement, the achievement which should be its primary contribution to the creation of a world order, while different religious beliefs continue to contend for followers. Secularism is Christianity’s gift to the world, ideas and practices which have often been turned against ‘excesses’ of the Christian church itself.

What is the crux of secularism? It is that belief in an underlying or moral equality of humans implies that there is a sphere in which each should be free to make his or her own decisions, a sphere of conscience and free action. That belief is summarized in the central value of classical liberalism: the commitment to ‘equal liberty’. Is this indifference or non-belief? Not at all. It rests on the firm belief that to be human means being a rational and moral agent, a free chooser with responsibility for one’s actions. It puts a premium on conscience rather than the ‘blind’ following of rules. It joins rights with duties to others.

This is also the central egalitarian moral insight of Christianity. It stands out from St Paul’s contrast between ‘Christian liberty’ and observance of the Jewish law. Enforced belief was, for Paul and many early Christians, a contradiction in terms. Strikingly, in its first centuries Christianity spread by persuasion, not by force of arms – a contrast to the early spread of Islam.

When placed against this background, secularism does not mean non-belief or indifference. It is not without moral content. Certainly secularism is not a neutral or ‘value-free’ framework, as the language of contemporary social scientists at times suggests. Rather, secularism identifies the conditions in which authentic beliefs should be formed and defended. It provides the gateway to beliefs properly so called, making it possible to distinguish inner conviction from mere external conformity.

Nor is this just a hypothetical understanding of secularism. This is the way secularism has traditionally been understood in the United States. It has been understood as a condition for authentic belief presupposed by Christianity. In contrast to views formed by Europe’s ‘civil war’, secularism in the United States has been identified with moral intuitions generated by Christianity.

Why has this not been the view in Europe? For centuries a privileged, monolithic church which was almost inseparable from an aristocratic society, confronted Europeans. So the church became associated in the popular mind with social hierarchy and deference, even at times with coercion, rather than with the moral equality and role of conscience that provide, in fact, the foundation of its beliefs.

A kind of intellectual incoherence – especially noticeable in Catholic
Europe — was the consequence. Religiously minded people struggled against the claims of civil liberty as threatening the church, while those who defended liberty looked upon the church as their enemy. Both sides failed to appreciate the extent to which promoting secularism in Europe amounted to turning the moral intuitions generated by Christianity against a privileged, coercive role for the church. By contrast, the United States has largely escaped from this ‘civil war’. The absence of both a monolithic church and aristocracy in the United States meant that Americans instinctively grasped the moral symmetry between secularism, with its prized civil liberty, and Christianity, accepting that secularism identifies a necessary condition of authentic belief. At times Muslim commentators themselves perceive that symmetry when they speak of ‘Christian secularism’.

What will happen to its ‘civil war’ now that Europe is faced with the challenge of Islam? Will Europeans come to understand better the moral logic that joins Christianity with civil liberty? It is important that they do so if they are to counter the argument that European secularism is a form of non-belief or indifference. Their self-understanding is at stake. If Europeans understand ‘secularism’ in the terms favoured by its critics — as mere consumerism, materialism and amorality — they lose touch with their own moral intuitions. They forget why they value freedom.

And what of the United States? There is no room for complacency. The rapid growth of Christian fundamentalism — in part, no doubt, a reaction to the threat of radical Islam — may now jeopardize the traditional American understanding of secularism as the embodiment of Christian moral intuitions. In the Southern and Western states especially, ‘born-again’ Christians are coming to identify secularism as an enemy rather than a companion. In struggling against abortion and homosexuality, they risk losing touch with the most profound moral insights of their faith. If good and evil are contrasted too simply, in a Manichaean way, charity is the loser. The principle of ‘equal liberty’ is put at risk.

It is a strange and disturbing moment in Western history. Europeans — out of touch with the roots of their tradition — often seem to lack conviction, while Americans may be succumbing to a dangerously simplistic version of their faith. On neither side of the Atlantic is there an adequate understanding of the relationship between liberal secularism and Christianity.

Failure to understand that relationship makes it easier to underestimate the moral content of liberal secularism. In the Western world today, it contributes to two temptations, to what might be called two ‘liberal heresies’. The first is the temptation to reduce liberalism to the endorsement of market economics, the satisfaction of current wants or preferences without worrying much about the formation of those wants or preferences. In doing so, it narrows the claims of justice. This temptation reduces liberalism to a crude form of utilitarianism. The second temptation is best described as ‘individualism’, the retreat into a private sphere of family and friends at the expense of civic spirit and political participation. This weakens the habit of association and eventually endangers the self-reliance which the claims of citizenship require. Both of these heresies focus on the second word of the core liberal value — ‘equal liberty’ — at the expense of the first word. They sacrifice the emphasis on reciprocity — on seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves — which we have seen to be fundamental to inventing the individual and which gives liberalism its lasting moral value.

If we in the West do not understand the moral depth of our own tradition, how can we hope to shape the conversation of mankind?