



**The Principle of Liberty**  
as addressed in Scott Hahn's *It is Right and Just*

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Liberalism, when viewed through both an historical and ecclesiological lens, is unmistakably an outgrowth of 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism and - through its malevolent descendant, *Secularism* - has led to the erosion of the foundation of the Catholic Church and the loss of virtue in our culture resulting in a violent rupture across the moral fabric of society. In his 2020 book, *It is Right and Just*, author Scott Hahn effectively addresses the principle of liberty by demonstrating why liberal societies are secular, why secularism is akin to paganism, and why ultimate freedom is only available through the truth, virtue, and justice of the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of the matter is the liberal supposition that man is fundamentally selfish and totally depraved and the individual is nothing more than an autonomous actor that seeks his own self-interest and aims to maximize his own advantage. According to Protestantism, Christianity and the Catholic Church cannot change this depravity; rather, it is *sola gratia* that saves men in spite of their fallenness yet fails to convert them into temporal men of charity.<sup>2</sup>

We see that at its best, (Locke's "classic") liberalism emphasizes the dignity of the individual, and therefore makes no distinction between members of different classes; society is simply a sum of the encounters of individuals seeking to maximize their pleasure and minimize their suffering. At its worst, however, liberalism is a slippery and pernicious slope into *radical*-liberalism and the complete eradication of virtue, where the aim of the State is to maximize personal pleasure and satisfaction for the most people possible, and to govern, legislate, and regulate accordingly.<sup>3</sup> In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, liberalism of the radical variety notoriously emerged on the world stage as an "enlightened" ideology, rapidly ascending in cries for "*Liberté*,

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just: Why the Future of Civilization Depends on True Religion*, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 701, *Industrial Revolution and Ideologies*, week five lecture, Summer 2021

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Wilker, *Worshipping the State - How Liberalism Became Our State Religion*, 2013

*Egalité, Fraternité*" only to quickly collapse upon the guillotine with the merciless de-Christianization of France and the murder of thousands of innocent victims, including Catholic priests and nuns. Liberalism flourished in predominantly Protestant countries, for example, under the leadership of America's founding fathers where citizens were unambiguously called to "subject themselves first to the tenets of the republic" (i.e. liberty and equality) but to practice their religion (particularly Catholicism) privately.<sup>4</sup>

We observe in the philosophies of liberalism and Protestantism that the Church and her eternal law has nothing to do with the governing of the world; Christianity is personal and private (we're told after all, only *individuals* are saved by God) while the world is governed by human law. The purpose of law in liberal society is to maximize the scope of free action in the public domain while the private (personal) domain is reserved for values, morality, and religion. Corresponding to this movement is the reduction of Jesus Christ to a mere moral character (not the Son of God) and the de-coupling of Jesus from the Church he founded, i.e. "Jesus is good, but the church is bad."<sup>5</sup> Thus, divine religion is forever segregated from earthly politics. *East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.*<sup>6</sup>

To the liberal, "freedom", or "positive liberty", is the right to act upon one's own free will, the power to affect one's destiny, the power "to do" something.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, liberalism is insatiable and - as in its sinful, human host - the thirst for wealth, power, honor, and pleasure<sup>8</sup> is unquenchable, thus the precipitous decline of American culture into what has become a veritable cesspool. Consider Jason Heron's frightfully perceptive grasp of contemporary society: "The

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 82

<sup>5</sup> Many philosophers - Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, et al - contributed to the relegation of Jesus to merely a moral figure.

<sup>6</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*, 1889. (The second line of Kipling's poem - "Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat." - provides a cautionary reminder.)

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 770, *Liberty*, week seven lecture, Fall 2021

<sup>8</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Secundae Partis, Question 2

terminus of modern liberty is thus not the continual aggrandizement of personal power and autonomy. Instead, it is the augmentation of the State's power to protect us from anything we consider a threat to our personal power and autonomy."<sup>9</sup> Witness the results of two centuries of State "progress" as "defender" of personal liberty: rampant free-market consumerism; state-run education from kindergarten through college; state-funded healthcare; contraception; sexual libertinism; pornography; homosexual marriage; the trans-gender and gender-rights movement; easy divorce; etc. etc. etc. All pitiful yet glaring examples of the sort of liberalism that elevates pleasure and satisfaction while removing any limits to spreading pleasure to the greatest number of people.

The Church has attempted to serve as a bulwark against the tyranny of unbridled liberty, including impassioned warnings that "torches of treason are being lit everywhere"<sup>10</sup> and a plea to adhere to the "infallible teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff...in order to safeguard the minds of the Church's children from the dangers of these present times...[namely] the confounding of license with liberty."<sup>11</sup> "Followers of liberalism deny the existence of any divine authority to which obedience is due and proclaim that every man is the law to himself; from which arises that ethical system which they style independent morality, and which, under the guise of liberty,

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<sup>9</sup> Jason A. Heron, *Leonine Social Anthropology: Analogy, Hierarchy and Liberalism*, Mount Marty College, Yankton, S.D. Through his essay on the writings of Pope Leo XIII, Heron shows that Leo, through his Papal encyclicals, reveals the truth that authentic freedom comes from recognizing that we've been created in the *imago Dei* and are thus destined with fellow mankind for communion in the Triune Lord. Heron interprets Leo's view where "the mediation of salvation to society perfects natural sociality by drawing natural sociality toward a supernatural completion." Leo insisted that "Human sociality is an effect of the Divine Wisdom created in creatures for the proper ordering of their flourishing." In other words, the Church is the precondition of society's flourishing, as opposed to a threat to it. Leo understands society as a complex set of groups, organized in a hierarchy, "differing in dignity, rights, and power". But he is firm in viewing the "whole" as greater than the "sum of the parts"; "The State, like the Church, should be one body, consisting of many members, some nobler than others, but all necessary to each other and solicitous for the common good."

<sup>10</sup> Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos, On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism*, 1832

<sup>11</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae - Concerning Americanism*, 1899

exonerates man from any obedience to the commands of God, and substitutes a boundless license.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite these admonitions, America - under the pretense of “liberty” and “equality” - has staggered headlong into the clutches of Satan, he who masquerades as an angel of light.<sup>13</sup> Consider the 1992 landmark Supreme Court case regarding the ultimate personal license - the “choice” of abortion - and the haunting words of Justice Anthony Kennedy: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”<sup>14</sup> Here, in the shocking majority opinion of the *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision we witness the egregious, horrifying “terminus of modern liberty” as forecast by Heron: the codification of infanticide as a right under the Constitution of the United States of America, resulting in 30 million dead babies since.<sup>15</sup> Under the aegis of Constitutional liberty, human life can be killed in order to accommodate “one’s own concept of existence”<sup>16</sup>, and Locke’s free-market is quick to capitalize; clinics specializing in all forms of “abortion care” are now advertised across the country with slogans and consumer marketing indistinguishable from auto body shops: “*We’re here for you when you need us. Expert, friendly care. Convenient locations and hours. Affordable fees.*”<sup>17</sup> Knitted into the fabric of constitutional law are the consequences of sin, “the all-consuming desire for profit...and the thirst for power with the intention of imposing one’s will upon others.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Libertas Praestantissimum*, 1888

<sup>13</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:14

<sup>14</sup> *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992) at 851

<sup>15</sup> Guttmacher Institute, *Abortion Incidence and Service Availability in the United States*, 2017

<sup>16</sup> When considering Kennedy’s hubris alongside similar human-rights failures of the “highest court in the land” (e.g. *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393, 1857) it is worth noting the incongruous, even absurd designation of a member of the Supreme Court as “*Justice*”.

<sup>17</sup> Capital Women’s Services, [www.capitalwomensservices.com](http://www.capitalwomensservices.com)

<sup>18</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 119

How did we arrive here? Is this the shining city upon a hill imagined in John Winthrop's 1630 sermon<sup>19</sup> of promise and hope for a new nation? Simply put, the answer to this vital question is that the malignant roots of today's secularism can be traced to the sprouts of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment formed from the seeds of Luther's revolt against the Catholic Church in 1517. Alas, the "zenith" of American liberty has been reduced to nothing more than the crumbling of a once-Christian culture back to the "brazen giant of Greek fame", that pagan ethos she once strove so heroically to transcend.<sup>20</sup>

Scott Hahn sheds light on this cultural degeneration by demonstrating why liberal societies are necessarily secular. He points out that liberalism, because of its emphasis on the individual and the placing of "the rights and liberties of the individual at the center of the constellation of political values", necessarily displaces "communal duties and the pursuit of the common good." The result being the notion that "religion is and must be a private matter" has thus "burrowed its way into the psyche of our civilization."<sup>21</sup> Hahn further points out that "The Catholic Church has always been liberalism's foil...the Church will always represent a threat because she...shows how the moral, the political, and the legal are all intrinsically tied together, how they are all rooted in reason, and how all of these things are anchored in heaven, in the divine order imposed on the cosmos by God, our Creator."<sup>22</sup> Hahn's insight reflects the immortal words of Pope Leo XIII who warned "The highest good and the greatest evil alike depend" upon the dignity with which liberty - the highest of man's natural endowments - is exercised. "Such being the condition of human liberty, it necessarily stands in need of light and strength to direct its actions to good and to restrain them from evil. Without this, the freedom of our will would be our

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<sup>19</sup> Governor John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630

<sup>20</sup> Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, November 2, 1883

<sup>21</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 76-78

<sup>22</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 85, 86

ruin.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, man is responsible for his actions, thus natural liberty must be informed by man’s intelligence and reason, which can only be properly shaped by the higher power of Jesus Christ and his Catholic Church. “From this it is manifest that the eternal law of God [i.e. the law of the Gospel] is the sole standard and rule of human liberty.”<sup>24</sup>

Hahn advances this line of thinking to assert that liberalism is more than merely secular, “It’s necessarily idolatrous...that is what the spiritual and social chaos of secularism resolves into.”<sup>25</sup> Hahn echoes the wisdom of Aquinas by affirming that our civilization worships at the altar of materialism, bowing to idols of sex and money, declaring that “lust and greed go hand in hand.” Revealing abortion for what it is - “a demonic sacrament” - Hahn acknowledges “We’ve built a society and economy that are based on these idols of achievement and prosperity and that require the ability to destroy lives that inconvenience those idols and are too powerless to fight back...The Aztecs have nothing on us.”<sup>26</sup>

Here, Hahn recognizes the fatal flaw of liberalism, and the deadly manifestation of this flaw in contemporary social life: the failure to protect and defend the dignity and sanctity of the human person, created in the image of God. “The Church sees in men and women, in every person, the living image of God himself...[therefore] every expression of society must be directed towards the human person.”<sup>27</sup> This point evokes the Magisterium of the Church which “underlines the contradiction inherent in affirming rights without acknowledging corresponding responsibilities”. In the words of Pope John XXIII, “Those, therefore, who claim their own rights, yet altogether forget or neglect to carry out their own respective duties, are people who

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<sup>23</sup> Pope Leo XIII - *Libertas Praestantissimum*, 1888

<sup>24</sup> Pope Leo XIII - *Libertas Praestantissimum*, 1888

<sup>25</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 87, 90

<sup>26</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 94, 95

<sup>27</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 105, 106

build with one hand, and destroy with the other.”<sup>28</sup> The obligation to protect the “right to life...the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception”<sup>29</sup> is chief among the responsibilities of the citizens of a free and just society.

Failure to defend innocent life represents quintessential liberal injustice, and the personification of secularism. Dr. Andrew Jones provides an agonizing illumination of the true wickedness of abortion and the duty-bound role of the Church in society: “The possibility of abortion nullifies the Christian inversion of power...it reasserts a pagan power structure in which power is for itself - contained, divinized, and constituted by self-interest...this is always the case in any regime of child-sacrifice...[as such] the pro-life movement *is* the Catholic Church re-asserting her social teaching against the errors of liberalism and the resurgent paganism that it invites. To be pro-life is simply to be Catholic.”<sup>30</sup>

While Hahn concedes “David Hume’s thoroughly destructive contribution to modern philosophy [i.e.] the claim that our reason is entirely at the service of our desires”<sup>31</sup> he implores his readers instead “to desire to live in the truth, to pursue the good, to bring justice to our relationships and our society”<sup>32</sup> and demonstrates why ultimate freedom is only available through the truth, virtue, and justice of the cross of Jesus Christ. Hahn emphasizes that “genuine freedom and humane autonomy are found not in the absence of restraint but in harmony with the divine order”<sup>33</sup> echoing the words of Pope Pius XII, “God alone, the origin of all things, possesses within Himself, by reason of His infinity, all that is good.”<sup>34</sup> Hahn shows that pursuit

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<sup>28</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 156

<sup>29</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 155

<sup>30</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 770, *Abortion*, week eight lecture, Fall 2021

<sup>31</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 116

<sup>32</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 117

<sup>33</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 92

<sup>34</sup> Pope Pius XII - *Ci Riesce*, 1953



of goodness and truth begins with knowledge “rooted in the desire to understand...built into human nature by our Creator”<sup>35</sup>, and teaches that “our desires are neither arbitrary nor entirely intrinsic: They emerge from the authorities we trust and to which we feel we owe obedience in justice. In other words, our desires are related to our cultivation of the virtue of religion.”<sup>36</sup>

Virtue makes us truly free by subjecting our desires - through habits formed by instruction, obedience, and repetition - to rational control. A virtue, e.g. temperance, allows us to choose to experience a positive activity, or avoid a negative one with equal pleasure. Virtues are therefore real powers, real abilities of choice that do not encounter a conflict between our intellects and our wills.<sup>37</sup>

“At the root of personal and social divisions...there is a wound which is present in man’s inmost self...the sin which each one of us commits when we abuse our own freedom.”<sup>38</sup> The power to exercise freedom wisely - that is, the power to control certain urges through rationality - represents true liberty. And ultimate liberty is available only through Jesus Christ, “who achieved final victory over sin on Calvary.”<sup>39</sup> “The ultimate symbol of justice is the Cross. Justice is cruciform. Justice in earthly relationships depends on justice in the heavenly relationship that every individual and society has with God and His Church”<sup>40</sup> As validated by Pope Leo, “it is of no small advantage for the perfecting of human liberty, our Savior Jesus Christ has said ‘You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 116, 117

<sup>36</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 119

<sup>37</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 770, *Liberty*, week seven lecture, Fall 2021

<sup>38</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 115

<sup>39</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 167

<sup>40</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 113, 114

<sup>41</sup> Pope Leo XIII - *Libertas Praestantissimum*, 1888

As Pope Leo further explains, “Christ is the teacher and the exemplar of all sanctity, and to His standard must all those conform who wish for eternal life.”<sup>42</sup> Freedom, therefore, to the extent that it must exist in an unjust (fallen, sinful) world, takes on the form of martyrdom, i.e. the form of the cross. The just and free man must, in the most extreme case, die in order to remain free, to thwart the tyranny of sin. The act of a just society in an imperfect world is the confronting and undoing of sin. In this way, the virtuous man remains free by accepting sufferings, or by mounting small acts of resistance to the tyranny he faces in his day-to-day existence.<sup>43</sup>

Freedom to the liberal is a necessary element to achieve happiness, a means to an end, while freedom to the Catholic is an end in and of itself, i.e. the experience of the common good, the experience of a just life, of a life of happiness.<sup>44</sup> To the Catholic, man’s dignity and “goodness” is shaped by the law, which ultimately comes from God. “Man can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to him as one of the highest signs of his image...Man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within...But his freedom is not unlimited...for it is called to accept the moral law given by God.”<sup>45</sup>

In *It is Right and Just*, author Scott Hahn effectively addresses the principle of liberty by demonstrating why liberal societies are secular, why secularism is akin to paganism, and why ultimate freedom is only available through the truth, virtue, and justice of the cross of Jesus Christ. Hahn finally warns of the consequences of failing to adhere to God’s eternal law when

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<sup>42</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Testem Benevolentiae - Concerning Americanism*, 1899

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 770, *Liberty*, week seven lecture, Fall 2021

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Andrew Jones, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Catholic Studies 770, *Liberty*, week seven lecture, Fall 2021

<sup>45</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 135

he quotes John Adams, who said in 1798, “Our Constitution was made for only a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Hahn goes on to affirm that “Political systems that claim not to be based in or to favor religious principles have an unsurprising habit of failing in the most basic regard.”<sup>46</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville took a similar stance, based on his observations of the young American republic in 1831: “It is natural that they [the partisans of liberty] should hasten to invoke the assistance of religion, for they must know that liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.”<sup>47</sup>

Mary Our Immaculate Mother, patroness of “The Land of the Free”<sup>48</sup>, pray for us. May God continue to bless - and have mercy on - America.

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<sup>46</sup> Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley, *It is Right and Just*, at 61, 73

<sup>47</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

<sup>48</sup> [www.nationalshrine.org](http://www.nationalshrine.org)