

CONTRASTING CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM

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That in all things God might be glorified.

1. TWO CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM, TWO FORMS OF CULTURE

The contemporary world is being dominated ever more by a secular, liberal, hedonistic anti-culture that is a threat to true human happiness, and flourishing. This secular anti-culture originated in the West in a rejection of the traditional culture of Western Christendom, but it has now become a global force, and one therefore that Islam will have to contend with as well. One way of understanding the conflict between secular anti-culture and the traditional Christian culture against which it rebelled is to distinguish their very different concepts of freedom. In the following reflections I want to consider the concept of freedom found in the Bible and the Christian tradition (and to some extent in the philosophy of antiquity), and then contrast it with the secular concept, rooted in the philosophy of the so-called Enlightenment. I shall try to show why the secular concept of freedom is so dangerous.

One can consider freedom on many different levels. For the sake of clarity I shall distinguish between three such levels: 1) exterior or political freedom, 2) interior or natural freedom, 3) moral freedom. The secular and Christian concepts of freedom differ on all three levels. I shall summarize the differences briefly before considering each view more closely.

1) For the Christian tradition *external freedom* means not being subordinated to another's good, not being a slave. Politically such freedom is realized by a political rule that orders people to their own true common good— a good that is truly good *for them*. For the secular tradition of the Enlightenment in contrast, external freedom means not being commanded by another to act in one way rather than another. Negatively this kind of freedom is realized by limiting the scope of government to the preservation of external peace, leaving each

¹ I have revised my remarks in the light of the discussion at the conference. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the organizers and participants in the conference especially Christian Machek, Taher Amini Golestani, the *Johannes-Messner-Gesellschaft*, the *Institut für Religion und Frieden* of the Austrian Military Diocese, the *International Institute for Peace and Religions*, and the *ViQo Circle for Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue on Religion, Philosophy, and Political Theory*. I would also like to thank Peter Kwasniewski, Alan Fimister, and Susan Waldstein for helpful comments.

citizen free to seek whatever he thinks is the good. Positively it is realized by the participation of all citizens in political rule— so that everyone can claim to be “self-ruled.”

2) *Interior or natural freedom* is taken in the mainstream of the Christian tradition to mean the ability of man to understand what is good, deliberate about how it is to be attained, and choose means suitable to attaining it. Unlike the animals, man is not determined by instinct, but is able to deliberate about his actions. On the secular view, however, internal or natural freedom is taken to mean a completely undetermined self-movement of will. On the secular view man is free not only to deliberate about how to attain the good, but *to decide for himself what the good is*.

3) *Moral freedom*, according to the Christian tradition, means knowing what the true good for man is, and what means are necessary to attain it, and being able to make use of those means. Moral freedom means being liberated from bad habits and disordered passions that lead us away from what we know is the good. To be morally free is to live in accordance with the nature that God has given us— it is to be virtuous and wise. For secular culture on the other hand, moral freedom means not being determined by cultural pressures, rejecting conformity for the sake of “authenticity” and “originality” deciding on one’s own peculiar way of living human life, based on one’s own “freely chosen” (i.e. arbitrarily chosen) “values.”

2. TRUE FREEDOM

The Book of Exodus is a story of liberation, of attaining freedom. The people of Israel is enslaved, they are forced to work hard for the Egyptians. Their slavery is in the first place an external slavery: they are forced to work for the good of their Egyptians masters rather than their own good, to realize their master’s end, not their own end. Their liberation is therefore also in the first place and external, political liberation. They are to be liberated from the power of Egypt in order to attain to *their own* true good and end as the chosen people of God.

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’” (Ex 5:1) God’s message to Pharaoh demands an external, political freedom for his people in order that they might attain to their true good, which consists in worshiping God (holding a sacrificial feast in God’s honor). But it becomes clear in the desert that the people need moral freedom as well as political freedom to be able to attain to their good. They are enslaved to the false gods of Egypt and to their own disordered passions— they fall back into idolatry, and long for the fleshpots of Egypt. They are unable to live as God’s chosen people in peace and justice, worshiping Him alone.

The Ten Commandments can be seen as an aid that God gives to the people to teach them moral freedom. God introduces the commandments by reminding the people of their

liberation from Egypt: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Exodus 20:2) But the commandments are meant to bring them to a truer liberation: liberation from sin.

The giving of the commandments implies that the people have natural freedom, that is, “free will.” They must be able to understand the good, and chose the means that lead to it. In Deuteronomy God emphasizes their need to make a *choice*:

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

The law shows the way to life, to the true good, and the people are able to understand this and choose to obey the law.

In the New Testament, St. Paul, tells us that the law was not enough. Human nature is wounded by original sin. And it is too difficult for persons with this wounded nature to follow the law, even though they know that it leads to life. But the grace of Christ heals human nature, and gives it the power to obey the law, and to attain to an even greater good than the life promised in the Old Testament. St. Paul teaches that Christ’s grace frees us from the law, insofar as it enables to do the good spontaneously without need for the law. I quote a famous passage from the Epistle to the Galatians at length:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [...] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:13-23)

The desires of the flesh prevent us from doing what we would, that is what we truly desire, what leads to our true good. But the power of the Spirit enables us to be free from the law,

not because it gives us permission to break the law, but because it enables us to fulfill the essence of the law, which consists in loving the good, easily and without coercion.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches that He has come to liberate the people from slavery to sin:

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will **know the truth**, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free?'" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:31-34)

The Jewish leaders think that they are already free, but Jesus teaches them that true moral freedom will only come if they remain with Him, allowing themselves to be formed by Him, so that they know God as their true good and attain to unity with Him.

The vision of freedom given in the Bible was further unfolded throughout the Christian tradition. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is the first great theorist of "free will," as a faculty of choosing.² This faculty chooses which of our inclinations to follow. But it is naturally inclined to happiness; it chooses to follow inclinations, only because they seem to lead to happiness. All men want to be happy. *The will is not "free" to desire unhappiness.* Happiness is found in *wisdom*, which is the attainment of God as the highest good, and no one can be prevented from attaining God against his will. Therefore, no one can be made unhappy against his will. But everyone *wills* happiness. So why is it that so many persons are not happy? How is that possible? How can one both will to be happy and choose not to be happy? "How does anyone suffer an unhappy life by his will, since absolutely no one wills to live unhappily?"³ Augustine's answer is that the will is able to err by choosing things that are incompatible with happiness, even while continuing to will happiness:

All the people you mentioned, who follow different things, pursue good and avoid evil. Yet because different things seem good to one person and to another, they follow different things. Thus anyone pursuing what should not have been pursued – even though he pursues it only because it appears good to him – nevertheless is in error. [...] To the extent that all people pursue the happy life, then, they are not in error. But people are in error to the extent that they stray from the road of life that

² See: Johannes Brachtendorf, *Einleitung to Augustinus, De libero arbitrio – Der freie Wille*, vol. 9 of *Augustinus Opera – Werke* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), p. 45; Eva Brann, *Un-Willing: an Inquiry into the Rise of the Will's Power and an Attempt to Undo it* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2014), pp. 22-37. Brachtendorf and Brann go slightly too far in saying that Augustine *invented* the will—the denial of the term "will" to ancient concepts such as the Aristotelian *boulesis* seems to me to be based on a too narrow, modern concept of will. As Brann herself admits, Thomas Aquinas's account of *voluntas* (will) corresponds to Aristotle's account of *boulesis*— if one can call the one "will" why not the other?

³ *De libero Arbitrio*, 1.14.30.100; *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, trans. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 25.

leads to happiness, even if they profess and protest that they only want to attain happiness; “error” means following something that does not lead where we want to reach.⁴

Here Augustine is arguing that those who err are deceived by a false appearance of good. But how does such deception arise? Augustine argues that there are three kinds of false appearance of good:

but the will sins when it is turned away from the unchangeable and common good, towards its private good, or towards something external, or towards something lower. The will is turned to its private good when it wants to be in its own power; it is turned to something external when it is eager to know the personal affairs of other people, or anything that is not its business; it is turned to something lower when it takes delight in bodily pleasures.⁵

The “great and fundamental good” of human beings is a common good, in the sense that “he who is unwilling to share this possession cannot have it,”⁶ but for this very reason turning away towards one’s own private good has an *appearance* of the self-sufficiency proper to God. In the *Confessions*, in wondering about why he had stolen pears as an adolescent, Augustine describes this false appearance in terms of apparent freedom:

Of what excellence of my Lord was I making perverse and vicious imitation? Perhaps it was the thrill of acting against Your law—at least in appearance, since I had no power to do so in fact, the delight a prisoner might have in making some small gesture of liberty—getting a deceptive sense of omnipotence from doing something forbidden without immediate punishment.⁷

In struggling with the question of what led him to steal the pears, Augustine also explains turning toward the external and toward the lower in terms of deceptive appearances of likeness to God, and yet a mystery remains. For, Augustine teaches that it is natural for the will to be turned toward God, where true happiness is to be found.⁸ The turning away is a defect, a weakness, a sort of nothingness, a failure to be what we are: “We admit that this movement is sin, since it is a defective movement, and every defect is from nothing.”⁹

St. Thomas Aquinas further developed Augustine’s account with the help of Aristotle. According to St. Thomas, will is a faculty that is dependent on the faculty of reason. It is *rational desire*. Just as there is a desire in the sensitive part of the soul when we sense something pleasurable to senses (eg. when we smell good food), so there is desire in the rational part of the soul when we understand something good. And the faculty for this desire is the will. As soon as reason understands something as good, the will moves toward it. To understand something as good is to understand it as contributing to my perfection and completion. That is, as leading to the final end, which is happiness. Now since there are

⁴ *De libero Arbitrio*, 2.9.26.100-101; trans. King, p. 50.

⁵ *De libero Arbitrio*, 2.19.53.199; trans. King, p. 70.

⁶ *De civitate Dei*, XV,5; *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), p. 483.

⁷ *Confessiones*, II,6; *The Confessions*, trans. Frank Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), p. 32.

⁸ See: William R. O'Connor, *The Natural Desire for God* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1948), pp. 18-25.

⁹ *De libero Arbitrio*, 2.19.53.200-2.20.54.204; trans. King, pp. 70-71.

many individual good things that can lead to happiness, the will is free to choose among them.¹⁰ The very highest good, the attainment of which is happiness, is God. In this life, however, the mind does not necessarily see the connection of God and happiness, and thus, while it necessarily desires happiness, it does not yet necessarily desire God. In Heaven, where we shall directly attain to God, it will not be possible for the will to turn away from Him.¹¹ In earthly life, however, the knowledge of God is indirect, and therefore weak.

Sharpening Augustine's account with Aristotelian notions, St. Thomas gives two ways in which we can be deceived by a false appearance of good. The first comes from the fact that in this life all our knowledge begins with sense-knowledge. Only with effort does the mind rise above sensible particulars to universal truths. Similarly the first goods that we first know are sensible goods, and so the desires of man are first pulled down towards those goods, and only with effort does the will rise to desire more universal goods.¹² The second way in which we can be deceived comes from the fact that the God, in Whom our happiness lies, is the common good, of all creation, but the good that is first known to us is the proper good of our nature. Thus to seek God as our good requires that we subordinate ourselves to Him, this requires a certain self-transcendence, which can fail.¹³

St. Thomas's account of freedom was officially endorsed by the popes of the 19th century in their struggle with modern liberalism. In his great encyclical *Libertas* (1888), Pope Leo XIII summarized St. Thomas's teaching on natural, moral, and political freedom. He explains that natural freedom is called *natural* because it is not acquired but is given to man by God as part of man's created nature.¹⁴ Because man has universal, rational knowledge he knows not only particular, sensible goods, but also the good in general. He therefore understands that no particular good is necessary to man, and he can then choose those particular goods that he thinks suitable means to his highest good and final end.¹⁵ In order for a person to

¹⁰ *Summa theologiae*, Ia q83 a1 c.

¹¹ «Until through the certitude of the Divine Vision the necessity of such connection be shown, the will does not adhere to God of necessity, nor to those things which are of God. But the will of the man who sees God in His essence of necessity adheres to God, just as now we desire of necessity to be happy.» (*Summa theologiae*, Ia q83 a1 c).

¹² See: Charles De Koninck, *On the Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists*, trans. Sean Collins, in: *The Aquinas Review* 4 (1997), pp. 10-71, at pp. 45-46.

¹³ «Indeed, although natural inclination of the will is present in every volitional agent to will and to love its own perfection so that it cannot will the contrary of this, yet it is not so naturally implanted in the agent to so order its perfection to another end, that it cannot fail in regard to it, for the higher end is not proper to its nature, but to a higher nature. It is left, then, to the agent's choice, to order his own proper perfection to a higher end.» (*Summa contra gentiles*, III,109).

¹⁴ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Libertas* (Rome, June 20, 1888), English translation:

https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_20061888_libertas.html (accessed October 2, 2016), ¶1.

¹⁵ *Libertas*, ¶3.

choose some particular good they must understand it as being *good*, that is, as desirable, as contributing toward the complete goodness of the final goal of life.¹⁶ But because both reason and will are fallible, man can be deceived by a false appearance of good.¹⁷

Moral freedom is the freedom from such error: the ability to know what means really lead to happiness and the ability to make use of them. To attain such freedom man has a need for law, which is “a fixed rule of teaching” in which “reason prescribes to the will what it should seek after or shun, in order to the eventual attainment of man's last end.”¹⁸ Law is thus not contrary to freedom, but a great help in attaining it.

The most important kind of law is *natural law*, which is “our reason, commanding us to do right and forbidding sin.” This voice of reason has the force of an obligatory law, because it is given to us by God, the author of our nature.¹⁹

Political freedom is attained when the laws of a society correspond to the natural law. In such a case the laws do not enslave the people by ordering them to someone else's good, but rather help them to attain what is really good for them—the common good in which their happiness lies—they help them to be morally free.²⁰ Thus Leo XIII teaches that political freedom is not dependent on any particular *form* of government, such as democracy. Any government that makes laws that are compatible with the natural law, whether it is monarchical, aristocratic, democratic, or some mixture of those three, gives its subjects or citizens political freedom.²¹ Participation of the greater number of the members of a society in political life might be a good *means* to helping frame laws that are in fact ordered to the common good (rather than the private good of some faction), but such participation is only a means; the essence of political freedom consists in the ordering of the laws to the true common good.²²

¹⁶ *Libertas*, ¶5.

¹⁷ *Libertas*, ¶6.

¹⁸ *Libertas*, ¶7.

¹⁹ *Libertas*, ¶8.

²⁰ *Libertas*, ¶10; cf. my essays “The Politics of Nostalgia,” *Sancrucensis*, April 29, 2014:

<https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2014/04/29/the-politics-of-nostalgia> (accessed November 8, 2016), and “The Good, the Highest Good, and the Common Good,” *The Josias*, February 3, 2015:

<https://thejosias.com/2015/02/03/the-good-the-highest-good-and-the-common-good> (accessed November 8, 2016).

²¹ See: Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Diuturnum illud* (Rome, June 29, 1881), English translation:

https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_29061881_diuturnum.html (accessed November 8, 2016), ¶7.

²² «Unless it be otherwise determined, by reason of some exceptional condition of things, it is expedient to take part in the administration of public affairs. And the Church approves of every one devoting his services to the common good, and doing all that he can for the defense, preservation, and prosperity of his country. Neither does the Church condemn those who, if it can be done without violation of justice, wish to make their country independent of any foreign or despotic power. Nor does she blame those who wish to assign to the State the power of self-government, and to its citizens the greatest possible measure of prosperity. The Church has always

3. FALSE FREEDOM

The account of freedom that I have just sketched out sees human freedom at every level as being tied to an objective order of the good. But another account of freedom came to be dominant in modern times, an account that sees freedom as independent from any objective good. Such has, of course, ancient antecedents. Even in the book of Genesis the serpent tempts Eve to eat the fruit that God has forbidden by saying, “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). This can be understood to mean that you will be independent of the objective order of good established by God, and will yourself *decide* what is good and what is evil.²³ This is tempting because it flatters human pride, giving human beings an apparently more exalted status. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that such pride is always the reason for rebellion against God.²⁴ The Roman poet Lucretius gave an account of freedom as “pleasure driven randomness” that is similarly disengaged from any objective order of good.²⁵

But in modern times such an account of freedom became dominant. Ironically, the modern view of freedom was developed out of the view that can be found in certain late-medieval theologians, who certainly did not want to rebel against God, but rather to emphasize the sovereignty of God’s will. Peter of John Olivi (c. 1248-1298),²⁶ John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308),²⁷ and especially William of Ockham (c. 1287-1347)²⁸ developed a theory of free will that saw it as completely arbitrary determination, not constrained by natural desire for the good. They applied this account to God in the first place, but then also to man. According to Ockham,

most faithfully fostered civil liberty, and this was seen especially in Italy, in the municipal prosperity, and wealth, and glory which were obtained at a time when the salutary power of the Church has spread, without opposition, to all parts of the State.» (*Libertas*, ¶¶45-46).

²³ That was famously the interpretation given by Heinrich Heine, who saw the parallels with modern philosophy in the shape of G.W.F. Hegel: «there are indeed many [...] beautiful and noteworthy narratives in the Bible [...] as, for example, just at the beginning, there is the story of the forbidden tree in Paradise and of the serpent, that little adjunct professor who lectured on Hegelian philosophy six thousand years before Hegel’s birth. This blue-stocking without feet demonstrated very ingeniously how the absolute consists in the identity of being and knowing, how man becomes God through cognition, or, what is the same thing, how the God in man thereby attains self-consciousness. This formula is not so clear as the original words: When ye eat of the tree of knowledge ye shall be as God!» (Heinrich Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, trans. John Snodgrass (London: Trübner and Co., 1882), p. 13 (I have slightly modified the translation).

²⁴ «Aversion from God has the nature of an end, inasmuch as it is sought for under the appearance of freedom, according to Jer. 2:20: “Of old you have broken my yoke, you hast burst my bonds, and you have said, ‘I will not serve.’”» *Summa theologiae*, IIIa q8 a7 c.

²⁵ Brann, *Un-Willing*, p. 14.

²⁶ See: Dominic Whitehead, O.F.M., *The Pre-eminence of the Will in the Philosophical Anthropology of Petrus Iohannis Olivi* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Vienna, forthcoming).

²⁷ See: Brann, *Unwilling*, pp. 60-64.

²⁸ See: Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), chs. 10, 14.

the choice of the will does not follow knowledge of the good, but rather precedes all other acts including knowledge: “For I can freely chose to know or not to know, to will or not to will.”²⁹

But it was the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) who must be seen as the true father of the modern idea of freedom. Descartes’s philosophy of pure thought emptied the natural world of all inherent goodness and teleology.³⁰ The world was seen merely as material for human domination, the imposition of human will. Hence will was not seen as appetite for an objective good, but as pure self-determination. Descartes is very explicit that freedom of the will makes the human person independent of God: “freewill[...] makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects.”³¹

Descartes’s idea of freewill was highly influential on all of modern philosophy. Modern ideas of political freedom were especially indebted to him. If the freedom of the will means the will is not determined by the good, but only by itself, then political freedom can no longer consist in having laws ordered to the true good. Instead, modern so-called “liberal” political theory understands political freedom as self-legislation. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), to take only one particularly clear example,³² argued that a ruler who tries to order its subjects to their own true good would be acting against their freedom:

A Government founded upon the principle of Benevolence towards the people—after the analogy of a *father* to his children, and therefore called a *paternal Government*—would be one in which the Subjects would be regarded as children or minors unable to distinguish what is beneficial or injurious to them. These subjects would be thus compelled to act in a merely passive way; and they would be trained to expect solely from the Judgment of the Sovereign and just as he might will it, merely out of his goodness, all that *ought* to make them happy. Such a Government would be the greatest conceivable *Despotism*; for it would present a Constitution that would abolish all Liberty in the Subjects and leave them no Rights.³³

In order to preserve freedom, Kant argues, the government must be limited to balancing the freedom of different individuals:

²⁹ Quoted in: Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 331.

³⁰ See the chapter on Descartes in my forthcoming dissertation. A draft of the Descartes chapter is available online: https://www.academia.edu/13118432/Symbolic_Calculation_and_the_Scientific_Revolution.

³¹ René Descartes, Letter to Christina Queen of Sweden, 10 November, 1647, in: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991), vol. 3, p. 326. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1989), p. 147.

³² Similar accounts had already been given by “liberal” thinkers as diverse as John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778).

³³ Immanuel Kant, “The Principles of Political Right Considered in Connection with the Relation of Theory to Practice in the Right of the State,” in: *Kant’s Principles of Politics, Including his Essay on Perpetual Peace*, ed. and trans. William Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), p. 36.

No one has a right to compel me to be happy in the peculiar way in which he may think of the well-being of other men; but everyone is entitled to seek his own happiness in the way that seems to him best, if it does not infringe the liberty [i.e. freedom] of others in striving after a similar end for themselves when their Liberty is capable of consisting with the Right of Liberty in all others according to possible universal laws.³⁴

This is one side of modern political theory, and it has had tremendous consequences. One thing that it demands is the complete independence of the state from religion, since religion always proposes a definite idea of human happiness, and therefore is seen as a threat to freedom. In the West, this view of political freedom has been embedded in the laws. A particularly clear expression of it was given by the United States Supreme Court:

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. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.³⁵

But there is also another side to the modern idea of political freedom, namely the demand that each citizen *participate* in the framing of the laws. Kant expresses the reason for this demand as follows:

All right, in fact, depends on the laws. A public law, however, which determines for all what is to be legally allowed or not allowed in their regard, is the act of a public Will, from which all right proceeds and which therefore itself can do no wrong to anyone. For this, however, there is no other Will competent than that of the *whole* people, as it is only when all determine about all that each one in consequence determines about himself. For it is only to himself that one can do no wrong.³⁶

This demand is fulfilled by representative democracies. Hence, in the modern view, the only legitimate form of government is democracy.³⁷

It has often been noted that there is a certain tension between the two sides of the modern idea of political freedom, with some modern political movements giving more emphasis to the first, and others to the second. But almost all modern political movements accept both sides in some form or other.³⁸

Another important element in the modern idea of freedom, what we might call the modern ideal of *moral freedom* arose out of the Romantic reaction against the rationalism of philosophers such as Descartes and Kant. The 18th and 19th century Romantics rejected the Cartesian idea of cool, dis-engaged will and reason, confronted with a neutral meaningless world of extension. But Romanticism did not return to a pre-Cartesian, teleological

³⁴ Kant, "The Principles of Political Right," p. 36.

³⁵ *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, United States Supreme Court, 1992:

<http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/505/833.html> (accessed November 11, 2016).

³⁶ Kant, "The Principles of Political Right," pp. 42-43.

³⁷ See: Waldstein, "The Politics of Nostalgia."

³⁸ Cf. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in: idem, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-172.

world-view. It wanted to preserve the sovereignty of the human subject, but in a new way. Therefore it imagined an inchoate “current of life” underlying all things that expresses itself through living things, striving for ever higher expression. Man’s spirit is stirred by the sublime in nature, and this allows him to “create” new expressions of spirit that articulate and bring into being what was only potential before.³⁹ This Romantic vision underwent many developments and changes over time, but what remained was the idea that for a human being to be really free they had to express themselves in their own unique way. Human desire, on this view, is not *elicited* by good things, but is rather a potential force that expresses itself, and brings “value” (as the good now comes to be called) into existence. Freedom means being “true to oneself” by finding an “authentic” way of expressing one’s desires, and thus creating one’s own “values.”⁴⁰

The Romantic, expressivist idea of freedom was an important element in bringing about the so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, which continues to our own day. Sexual desire being particularly strong and ecstatic, contemporary culture sees sexual expression as a key to “authenticity” and freedom. Hence the proliferation of various forms of sexual perversion, all seen as “authentic self-expressions,” giving value and meaning to human life. And hence the violent opposition to the natural law, which forbids such perversions, when it is proclaimed by traditional Christians and Muslims.

4. CONCLUSION: THE SLAVE OF SIN

The modern idea of freedom, and the “liberal” culture built on it, have many attractions. Their individualistic, self-determining, approach to the good does do away with some of the limits and self-sacrifices demanded by an approach based on a common pursuit of objective ends. It gives room for movement and an independence from others. Moreover, as our very own Heinz Theisen has argued,⁴¹ such an individualistic approach can avoid some of the conflicts that arise from different views of what the objective good for man is. In our discussions he also raised the point that in such a liberal order individuals are free to accept religious teaching on God as the final end of human life, the good in whom alone we can find happiness.

But the advantages of the modern view of freedom come at a great price. The attempt to determine one’s own “values” for oneself often means that one becomes dominated by one’s own passions; the desires and loathings that arise from the sense-knowledge in which all our knowledge begins. This is not freedom, but slavery. The American novelist David Foster

³⁹ See: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, ch. 21.

⁴⁰ Cf. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁴¹ Heinz Theisen, “Coexistence and Cooperation of Civilizations,” ViQo Circle: <https://viqocircle.org/2016/11/09/theisen-on-coexistence-and-cooperation-of-civilizations/> (accessed November 11, 2016).

Wallace spoke of the “default settings” of human beings as being the “worship” of things like money, sexual allure, and power, but that the “worship” of such things will “eat you alive.”⁴² To become free of such things requires great effort, and usually a *communal* effort.

The claim that the modern culture of liberal freedom leaves room for those who hold to an older notion of freedom as related to objective good to follow their beliefs has to be qualified. The very fact that the whole culture is based on the competing, modern, “liberal” view of freedom exerts tremendous pressure on those who would hold an older view to conform. As David Schindler put it:

Liberalism invites us to adopt only its freedom and its institutions while (putatively) permitting us to supply our own theories which will give meaning to freedom and free institutions; but liberalism does so— paradoxically— all the while hiding the very theory (of liberalism) which alone justifies this (purported) extrinsic relation between freedom institution and theory. In fact, this very extrinsic relation, which is taken to guarantee a supposedly ‘empty freedom,’ already embodies a definite, though hidden, conception of human nature and destiny[.]⁴³

Thus, the crisis of religious faith that we are witnessing in the West today is a logical outcome of the prevalence of this liberal idea of freedom, which inevitably leads to viewing religion as a limit on freedom. The supposedly neutral view of the good, in which each person decides his values for himself, really turns persons away from their true good, in which alone true happiness can be found. In its place it sets an ethics of arbitrary self-expression that is becoming more and more perverse and irrational by the day. This is not freedom, but slavery: “every one who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). I am therefore convinced that we should oppose the modern view of freedom by every possible means. The most important means of opposition is the revival of the traditional and true account of freedom.

⁴² David Foster Wallace, “Kenyon Commencement Speech,” in: Dave Eggers (ed.), *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2006* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 2006), pp. 355-364, at p. 362.

⁴³ David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 33-34.