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With Reason Attentive to Grace: Pierre Manent's Correction of Liberalism and Christian Utopianism

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For forty-five years or more, the contemporary French political philosopher Pierre Manent has explored the tensions inherent in "the theological-political problem" as they manifest themselves in late modernity and in the human condition or situation more broadly. A convert to Catholicism (he was raised in a Communist family), a student of Raymond Aron and from there on an anti-totalitarian of the first order, Manent is a political philosopher who unequivocally upholds the truth of the "Christian proposition." Yet, as I shall show, he does not take his political bearings from theological categories or from revelation per se. He is first and foremost a political philosopher who takes his bearings from reason, from the natural order of things while being fully attentive to the workings of grace and conscience on the souls and free will of human beings. Manent rejects political theology, political deductions from explicitly theoretical categories or dogmas, whether put forward by a Catholic decisionist such as Carl Schmitt, the demi-Marxist liberation theologians, the quasi-theocratic integralists, or the proponents of "Radical Orthodoxy" such as John Milbank, with their imprudent disdain for everything connected to the liberal or bourgeois order.

Let us return to Manent's own intellectual itinerary. His conversion owes much to Louis Jugnet, a teacher of Manent's at a

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lycée in Toulouse and a Thomist of "strict observance," who introduced him to the ample and salutary role of "right reason" in Thomistic philosophical and theological reflection.[1] Manent remains indebted to the Thomistic "analysis of virtues, of prudence and justice, [its] analysis of action, of deliberation and of rational choice"[2]—and, one might add, to its effort to find a rightful place for the prudence and free will of human beings in God's providential design. But as Manent remarks in his autobiographical book of conversations, *Seeing Things Politically*, the Thomist appropriation of Aristotelian wisdom is "almost completely detached from [Aristotle's] political context and … political concerns." This "noble intellectual tradition" has largely "moralized and depoliticized Aristotle." It tends to look "at political experience 'from above'"[3] and to read Aristotle's *Ethics* in complete abstraction from his *Politics*. For all its ethical and metaphysical insights, it is thus of limited validity to the political philosopher, Christian or otherwise. But as we shall see, a more political or prudent Thomism will play a crucial role in Manent's subsequent rearticulation of the relationship between practical reason and the Christian proposition.

Manent's "Triangle": Politics, Philosophy, and Religion

But Manent remains at best a demi-Thomist, since he is preoccupied, in his own self-description, with the "triangle" of "politics, philosophy, and religion" in a way that refuses "complete devotion," at least complete intellectual devotion, to any of these competing human attitudes or orientations. In a profound existential sense, the religious man cannot be a philosopher "in the full sense" even if he can "employ philosophical tools very competently," since he "has answered the Call that precedes all questions." A magnanimous statesman such as Churchill is "too busy with 'human things'" to truly be a philosopher or religious man, while a certain kind of "philosopher"—say, Socrates or Leo Strauss (to mention a great figure closer to home who has been a significant influence on Manent)—turns away from human things "not to attend to the Father's" concerns, "but in order to pursue endless questioning."

Manent, in contrast, has committed himself to what he calls "a fragile equilibrium, or rather a productive disequilibrium," with the intent of "treating each of the three equally seriously."[4] That does not mean that Manent is not a believer: he most emphatically is a Christian of conviction. But he is one who refuses to let either philosophical reflection or religious devotion get in the way of allowing the "simply human perspective" from receiving its full due, something he believes political theology fails to do. He thus starts his inquiries with a precise and demanding phenomenology of the human city and the human soul. In Manent's view, Christianity and political philosophy must both begin by maintaining scrupulous fidelity to the "real" as it first comes to sight in human experience. Nature necessarily precedes grace in the human experience of things.

Péguy and the Imperative Not to Despise the Natural Order

Here, Manent takes his bearings from Charles Péguy's commentary on Pierre Corneille's *Polyeucte*, a great spiritual and political drama set in third-century Armenia. Manent, following Péguy, sees Corneille (a classic seventeenth-century French dramatist and the closest to a French equivalent of Shakespeare) as an exemplary Christian author who "does not pull down the world in order to elevate religion." Polyeucte is "not satisfied with having the truth for himself" despite the fact that he has just converted to Christianity. He has admirably opened himself up to divine grace but still wants "to be the equal of Severus, the Roman knight," equal to him on the plane (and perhaps even surpassing him on that plane) "in exercising human virtues," particularly "those of human honor and human generosity."[5] Polyeucte admirably wishes to partake in both the order of nature and the order of grace, and he does not wish to bypass the first to arrive more quickly at the second.

Manent, following two major Catholic authors, Corneille and Péguy, is committed to not "pull[ing] down the world in order to elevate religion." The natural virtues, the cardinal virtues, must be taken on their own terms without the misbegotten view that the

order of grace leaves the pagan virtues or human honor behind, minimizing them or even depreciating them in the process of spiritual ascent. Humble deference to the beneficence and providence of God our Father and Friend need not leave the Roman virtues of courage and prudence behind. Humility and magnanimity, a certain pride in our own natural and civic resources, are the two wellsprings of the human soul and of a Western civilization worthy of the name. In *Seeing Things Politically*, Manent even endorses Péguy's rather "brutal warning" to the "devout party" not "to believe that they are people of grace because they lack the strength to be of nature."[6] As we shall see, this understanding of the integrity of the "natural order of things" has much to do with Pierre Manent's rejection of "political theology" as a choice-worthy or viable enterprise. Political theology is not phenomenological enough—it does not begin in the beginning. In contrast, the political philosophy Manent advocates and practices, open to biblical wisdom, is much better prepared to do justice to the competing and tension-ridden—yet ultimately complementary—demands of nature and grace, truth and liberty, greatness of soul and humble deference to the Most High. Manent's is a project of *mediation*, attentive to the capacious balancing of the genuine goods of life, the city, and the soul, and of reason and the Christian proposition more broadly.

The Christian, the Cardinal Virtues, and Political Freedom

A due respect for the cardinal virtues—courage, temperance, justice, and prudence—must precede every effort to sanctify the world. As Manent put it at his farewell address at the École des Hautes Études on June 13, 2014, "Action stood before Pericles, it stood before Paul of Tarsus, and it stands before us. The question is to know how we can put the city's reasons to work, and thus what is our courage, what is our moderation, what is our justice, what is our prudence."[7] With C. S. Lewis and Rémi Brague, Manent does not believe that there is a distinctive *Christian* ethics or politics. Yet the Christian Gospel introduces "the commandment to love our enemies," and we are obliged to use the arts of intelligence to

come to terms with that most difficult and challenging demand on our souls.[8] This is the sempiternal structure of moral-political reality, and no historical process or ideological constructions can free us from our natural and supernatural responsibilities and obligations.

Manent believes that Christianity has a real, if complicated and somewhat tenuous, relationship to political freedom. The Christian tradition is anti-totalitarian to the core, since one cannot render to Caesar what is not his due (Matthew 22:21). And in the Acts of the Apostles (5:9), Peter adds more forcefully that one must "obey God rather than man." Yet the Catholic Church, in particular, was often suspicious of the pride and self-assertion associated with liberal and national movements. Republican liberty at its best produces "virile citizens," and "virile virtues," as both Aristotle and Tocqueville remind us. Yet, the Catholic Church often preferred the relatively quiescent subjects of clerical and authoritarian regimes (one is reminded of Dolfuss's Austria and Salazar's Portugal in the first half of the twentieth century) to the "pride and ambition" of republican citizens who had "confidence in their own powers." [9]

Free Will, Conscience, and Reflective Choice

Yet free will, reflective choice (as Aristotle called it), and moral responsibility, all crucial to a regime of liberty, vitally depend on conscience, "the interior space . . . that was discovered or invented by Christianity." This internal and invisible tribunal allows us to judge our own and others' actions as God himself would judge them. Manent strikingly observes that "the Greeks had a marvelous understanding of the movements of our soul, but they knew nothing of conscience." That was a defect of real importance. Their profound sense of the visibility of the virtuous soul left them with no ears "for the voice of conscience," which is "something one listens to."[10] Christianity is, in important respects, a transpolitical religion that nonetheless opened up "the invisible domain" of conscience in ways that are crucial to human self-understanding and to the exercise of moral and political agency.

Yet the early modern philosophers—Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bayle, and Spinoza, among them—would expel from their emerging science of politics both Aristotelian prudence or reflective choice and the free will and conscience that "emerged in the context of Christianity."[11] Machiavelli, in particular, put forward a new and radically paradoxical view of human freedom that was tethered to necessity and that aimed to displace nonsubjectivist conscience and practical reason from human and political life. But for Manent, Aristotle and Christianity, reflective choice and free will and conscience stand or fall together. They are the indispensable ground of practical life, practical reason, and moral and political agency. Manent draws on the full resources of classical and Christian wisdom to defend "liberty under law." In the early modern period it was confronted with two profound challenges, both the "Christian liberty" of Martin Luther, contemptuous as it was of natural law and the requirements of conscience, as well as the Machiavellian endorsement of infinite moral flexibility in the soul of the prince (see chapter 18 of *The Prince*) and of the reckless and audacious "conquest of *fortuna*" that informs the whole of theoretical modernity (see chapter 25 of *The Prince*).[12]

In his latest book, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward the Recovery of Practical Reason*, Manent argues that "the notion of conscience," traditionally understood, "supports and complements the Aristotelian analysis of practical life and of reflective choice so well that the two elements prove to be inseparable."[13] Once nonsubjectivist conscience is dismissed as a fiction or fairy tale, practical philosophy and the arts of prudence become well-nigh impossible. Human beings lose the tools to understand themselves and the human world. We moderns and late moderns literally become inarticulate. In the process, our very capacity for reasonable judgment, prudent choice, and moral responsibility erodes and loses its intelligibility.

A Return to Commanding Reason and Reflective Choice

Political theology cannot lead us out of our desperate straits. Rather, what is first needed is a return to common sense and

common experience, to a clear-eyed appreciation of the "natural order of things" and of the goods and motives that inform the human soul and that give rise to action guided by free will and conscience. Manent freely acknowledges that most of the philosophers and political philosophers who first inspired and articulated the liberal project sincerely wished "to liberate humanity from the shackles [and superstitions] that held them back and constrained them." But the almost immediate turn of these thinkers to scientistic reductionism, and their accompanying rejection of free will and conscience, made modern men and women less and less "capable of the practical operation that the Greeks thus called reflective choice and that the Christians called free action." With the best of intentions, perhaps, the "fathers of liberalism" created an individual whose decisions were increasingly determined in a mechanistic or quasi-mechanistic way. Despite the bluster that accompanies the modern affirmation of human autonomy, the modern individual is not seen, and does not understand himself, "as a truly free agent."[14] His autonomy is largely illusory.

What is needed is a classical and Christian reaffirmation of "commanding reason,"[15] wherein human persons, guided by reflective choice, conscience, and free will are neither playthings of necessity nor existentialists guided by nothing other than the groundless and contentless affirmation of the will, puffed-up "commitment" without rhyme or reason. The view of the agent that Manent defends avoids what Leo Strauss once so suggestively called (in the final chapter of *Natural Right and History*) the twin extremes (and errors) of the doctrinaire and the existentialist: all-encompassing necessity, on the one hand, and freedom divorced from commanding reason and the goods, ends, purposes, and finalities inherent in the exercise of human freedom, on the other.

Beyond Autonomy and Heteronomy

Freedom, Manent argues, can never be "the ultimate or main goal to a human being endowed with free will, an agent capable of reflective choice." As already noted, the free agent aims at what commanding reason, high moral and political prudence "commands

him," that is "right action, whose declensions are courage, justice, prudence, and temperance—in brief action that takes on its form and color according to the catalogue of the virtues." Commanding reason, "far from injuring action, gives it its rule and meaning."[16] In Manent's view, the "grammar" of moral and political agency transcends the false distinction between "autonomy" and "heteronomy" beloved by modern moral philosophers. Liberty is unthinkable, and it cannot give rise to a coherent practical operation, to meaningful and reasonable choice, without the humane but commanding law that gives it substance, content, and direction.

But "commanding reason" also depends crucially on human freedom. In an appendix to *Natural Law and Human Rights* called "Recovering Law's Intelligence,"[17] Manent reminds contemporary Christians that the rational creature, exercising the cardinal virtues, including the high virtue of prudence, is himself an essential element and instrument of divine Providence. Natural law is thus a crucial dimension of eternal law, as St. Thomas reminds us in question 91 of the "Treatise on Law." The Christian is thus obliged to overcome passivity and to exercise political responsibility in a way that avoids both radical relativism and radical secularism, on the one hand, and quietistic and theocratic contempt for the moral agency of Christians and citizens, on the other. Coming full circle, in the spirit of Corneille, Péguy, and now with a more political or prudent rendering of St. Thomas, Manent assures us that guided by Thomas's insights, Christians must "have more confidence in our practical reason and more esteem for our task."[18] We must take pride in our God-given natural gifts as responsible citizens and moral agents. Passivity, and the quietism that informs it, is an abdication of our moral and civic responsibilities, responsibilities commanded and ordained by Providence itself.

Beyond Integralism and Radical Secularism

In his luminous reflections on these themes in his 2016 book *Beyond Radical Secularism* (2015 for the French edition), Manent firmly rejects the twin extremes of integralist or theocratic politics, and a radical secularism that loses sight of the goods and motives

of the human soul and that ignores or even shows contempt for what he calls the "Christian mark"[19] of European and Western nations such as France. France, for example, cannot successfully defend itself against Islamist extremism if it defines itself as a secular wasteland without a political or spiritual history that predates the revolutionary nihilist carnival of May 1968. To be sure, the secular state ought to be cherished by defenders of civic peace and civic freedom. The original separation of church and state, religion and politics, "was once necessary" and it "remains salutary."[20] But the liberal order is fast losing confidence in the intimate connection between truth and liberty. It "has at bottom only one defect: it tends to be indifferent to truth."[21] But it is losing its soul as the denizens of liberty without law, and moralistic and censorious relativism, are increasingly intolerant toward "those who are worried about the truth." Reason loses its substance and efficacy when the various goods of life become innocuous "values," neither true nor false in themselves, and making no real claims on our souls. In a "Lenten Lecture" at Notre Dame Cathedral on February 25, 2007, Manent suggested that faith now "takes refuge, and sometimes shrivels," in the interior of the "heart, and tends to become confused with religious sentiment—more and more sentimental, less and less religious."[22] Many Christians thus confuse charity with tenderness and indiscriminate compassion, and the "religion of humanity" with its plans for limitless this-worldly transformation, with the Gospel of Christ.[23] As a result, deep confusion reigns in our polities, our churches, and our souls.

Some political theologians, such as John Milbank, wish to replace the liberal order with a religious state having a strikingly social democratic, even politically progressive, coloration. One can consult any number of his books. In contrast, Manent wishes to preserve the liberal political order and the secular state while rejecting the political philosophy that has led it to moral confusion, political passivity, and distrust of its own "Christian mark." Liberals have much to learn from their European forebears who aimed "to govern [themselves] by the guidance of [their own] reason and with attention to grace." Our forebears appreciated that "it was

necessary to find a place for the collaboration of human prudence and divine Providence." In that great task, "the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas was able to provide the principles, but not to show the way to put them concretely in practice." Today, confronted by secularist sterility, moral confusion, ideological extremism, Islamist violence, and false nostalgia for clerical and confessional states, it is still necessary to renew the "covenant" between "pagan ardor and pride" in human freedom, and our "confidence in the inexhaustible and imponderable benevolence of God." With neither revolutionary nor reactionary intent, Pierre Manent reminds us that "Europe was great through" self-governing and self-limiting "nations when it was able to mix Roman virtues, courage, and prudence, with faith in a God who is friend to every person."[24] Confidence in our own powers and faith in the promises of God, greatness of soul, and humility before the Most High make a "whole" of the soul and allow a true common good to flourish "under God."

In a 2008 text published in the French traditionalist Catholic monthly *La Nef* (Manent's text was called "Liberal and Catholic"), Manent leaves us with a warning: political theology cannot lead to the reinvigoration and restoration of European and Western nations of a "Christian mark." One cannot deduce the moral foundations of free and humane political orders "from the propositions and dogmas of Christianity." That is precisely the false conceit of political theology in its various forms. Whether we are speaking of "the Divine Right of Kings" or a *Marxisant* "Liberation Theology," misplaced political theologies cannot bring human freedom back into line with the requirements of the "natural order of things." "God save us from Christian utopias,"[25] Manent proclaims. Instead, statesmanship and political philosophy, informed by classical and Christian wisdom, attentiveness to the requirements of moral and political prudence, and a measured appreciation of the strengths and limits of "our temporal order," which remains to a large extent a liberal order, offer a much more promising route to the recovery and reinvigoration of a moral and political science worthy of believers and unbelievers alike. This is the most salutary path for

reconnecting truth and liberty without undermining the significant achievements of the liberal order, a path outlined with clarity, sobriety, and depth in the writings of Pierre Manent. Faithful to the best resources of reason and revelation, Manent sketches a humane and viable path beyond liberal neutrality, radical secularism, pseudo-Christian humanitarianism, and forms of Christian utopianism from liberation theology on the left to integralist nostalgia for clerical authoritarianism on the right. It is a path worthy of our deepest consideration.

Notes

1. See Pierre Manent, *Seeing Things Politically: Interviews with Benedicte Delorme-Montini*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock, with introduction by Daniel J. Mahoney (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2015), 20–22.
2. Ibid., 47.
3. These quotations about the Thomistic appropriation of Aristotelian wisdom can be found in ibid., 47.
4. All the quotations in this paragraph are from ibid., 59–60.
5. Ibid., 61–62.
6. All quotations in this paragraph are from ibid., 61–62.
7. See the appendix entitled "Knowledge and Politics," in *Seeing Things Politically*, 197–211, and see 207 for the quotation.
8. Ibid., 207.
9. Manent, *Seeing Things Politically*, 170.
10. All quotations in this paragraph are from *Seeing Things Politically*, 168–70.
11. On the modern philosophical assault on free will, see Manent, *Natural Rights and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock, with foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 87–89.
12. See Manent's discussion of Machiavelli's and Luther's distinct but complementary assaults on natural law and conscience in Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights*, 24–41.
13. Ibid., 133n21.
14. Ibid., 88.
15. Ibid., 88–90.
16. Ibid., 88.
17. See Manent's luminous discussion of the relationship between natural law and eternal law, Providence and human prudence, in the appendix

to Natural Law and Human Rights, "Recovering Law's Intelligence," 119–30, esp. 128–30.

18. Ibid., 128.
19. For Manent's discussion of the enduring "Christian mark" of Europe, which need not contradict the institutional separation of church and state, see Pierre Manent, *Beyond Radical Secularism*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock, with introduction by Daniel J. Mahoney (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2016), 19, 99–100, 109, 112, and 115.
20. Ibid., 61–65.
21. Pierre Manent, "The Grandeur and Misery of Liberalism," trans. Paul Seaton and Daniel J. Mahoney, *Modern Age* (Summer 2011): 176–183, esp. concluding page.
22. On the increasingly tenuous relationship between truth and liberty, and religion and reason in late modernity, see Manent's "A Lenten Lecture at Notre-Dame of Paris" (delivered on Sunday, February 25, 2007), trans. Ralph C. Hancock for *Modern Age*. See also Manent, "Conversion," *Commentaire* 31 (2008): 61–62. I have drawn from both pieces.
23. See Pierre Manent's foreword to Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), xvii–xxi.
24. All quotations in this paragraph are from Manent, *Beyond Radical Secularism*, 63–65.
25. All quotations in this paragraph are drawn from Manent, "Libéral et Catholique," in *La Nef*, July 2008.