
Religion and American Liberty

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The Theme is Freedom: Religion, Politics, and the American Tradition, by M. Stanton Evans. *Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1994. 366 pp. \$24.95.*

M. Stanton Evans is former editor of *The Indianapolis News*, former CBS commentator, and longtime columnist for the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. Evans, who now directs the National Journalism Center in Washington, D.C., has written one of the most important books of the decade. I confess not to have liked the title, but those his friends apparently suggested were even worse. Examples: "The Civilization They Tried to Hide" and "Everything You Were Ever Taught Was Wrong." Such titles may have scored dubious points for commercial success, but they were rightly judged too casual for the gravity of the subject and the dignity of this serious piece of work. If the main title still sounds a bit trivial, the subtitle well describes the crux of the book's content. One should not judge a book by its cover—or by its title. A more erudite and accessible treatment of the central role of religion in Western liberal tradi-

tion and American political thought is not known to me. This work is suitable as a college textbook for courses in American political and intellectual history. It should be a supplemental text for any number of other courses. It is also essential reading for the educated citizen.

Evans uses a wealth of historical data to trace conceptually the nexus between religious values and the rise of the American political system. Following key institutional threads, he tracks the beliefs and customs of our people from one stage to the next and, in so doing, proves what the historian Forrest McDonald has also said: ". . . the basic ideas of the American Republic all derive from the Bible and from medieval Christianity." Of greater moment is the inference that, in the absence of such religious moorings, the tradition of freedom that most now take for granted cannot persist. Jane Shaw

points out that, even those who have personal difficulty with religious faith find evidence that civilization needs it. In *The Fatal Conceit*, F. A. Hayek attempted, less than successfully, to bridge his own agnosticism and the indispensable God of Western culture. Evans would quickly distance himself from such an approach, however. No mere system of moral tradition is adequate if it is based on nonbelief.

The perennial problem, illustrated by the ghastly example of the Holocaust, is that totalitarian movements thrive in populations lacking interior guidelines. People who lack moral scruples—whose conduct is not governed more or less by an internal moral gyroscope conscientiously constructed and reinforced by the culture around them—look to the state to provide them with criteria for living. The state makes available exterior rules that come to displace religious values of self-restraint, and then men are apt to behave like robots.

Contemporary varieties of secular humanism, imposed as social policy by government, erode public and institutional supports of religion and help move the loci of control outside of persons. Hence the pattern evident in society today: the ever-burgeoning power of government, coincidental with an abatement of religious conviction and a rise in social pathologies.

This slide away from the traditional morality of inner restraint opens society to a host of problems that, in time, produce crisis. The United States of America today is just such a society. Charles E. Rice, professor of law at Notre Dame Law School, argues that

the reason the twentieth century has produced an unprecedented number of human rights proclamations accompanied by an even larger number of human rights *violations* is that the denial of objective truth reduces law to a function of raw power. The law is divested of moral authority when people lose their faith in a transcendent Power that stands above even the human law-givers and provides a standard by which temporal law itself must be judged. Pope John Paul II makes the same point in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (see No. 99): Shorn of man's relationship to God, just relations between people have no sure principle to guide them.

Like virtually every book, this one has weaknesses and omissions. While exploring in detail the relentless attack by the government and the nation's liberal elites on traditional morality and religion, Evans perhaps gives insufficient attention to the degree to which the people themselves abet the decline. For more than a century now, there has been a growing tendency—even among those who profess adherence to traditional religious faiths—to welcome novel doctrines and absorb cultural productions that promise morality on the cheap. Man is torn between good and evil, and a significant portion of the latter quality manifests itself not in the blatantly diabolical but, rather, in mundane laziness. There is a natural tendency, if not consciously and persistently resisted, to embrace ideas that promise happiness and the good society without requiring the difficult moral effort by individuals that Irving Babbitt describes as "inner working."

Though Evans is correct that unconstrained government has weakened the moral and even intellectual fibre of the American people, there is also truth in the adage that fools put fools into office. Another weakness that some will be quick to point out is that Evans chooses not to address the peculiar pitfalls of organized religion or the darker episodes when churches themselves served tyranny and oppression. But such omissions do not weaken the book's central thesis as it relates to Western civilization and, especially, as it relates to America: Western notions of voluntary behavior and limits on state compulsion were incontrovertibly derived from Christian doctrine. Those who imagine the ideas came from the Renaissance, John Locke, or Enlightenment *philosophes* mistake the beneficiaries for the source.

The widespread error that links the origin of freedom to secular tradition frequently stems from a pervasive misconception of what the Middle Ages were like. This misunderstanding colors much else, since it produces the impression that freedom at its origin was thwarted by religion, rather than nourished. Even such "conservative" and libertarian writers as Ayn Rand and Ludwig von Mises have assumed the Middle Ages were characterized by the same stifled liberty suffered by a later Europe, *after* Renaissance ideas of absolute kingship and related institutional changes had produced their effect. As friends and enemies of freedom alike tend to overestimate the salutary impacts of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (i.e., periods of putative Rebirth), attributes of liberality get pro-

jected backwards to classical times and philosophers in a way that is simply unhistorical.

Contrary to the "consensus" record in most textbooks, Lord Acton tells us that the Middle Ages in Europe were characterized almost everywhere by representative government unknown to the ancients. The principle that taxation was inseparable from representation also was recognized. Under some circumstances, insurrection was considered to be a duty sanctioned by religion. Constitutionalism was indeed the foremost political concept of the Middle Ages. After all, the Magna Carta is a *medieval* document, achieved by the exertions of the clergy and the feudal barons. The document proclaimed the idea of limits to power that became central to the development of libertarian practice. Indeed, the Magna Carta embodies "Medieval theory," according to Otto von Guericke, in that the power of the state or sovereign may not exceed the bounds of Natural Law (151).¹

None of this is to deny that non-religious sources and epochs provided meaningful contributions to the republican form and theory of government. Still, Evans is correct that the most significant source of ordered liberty as it developed in America was the Christian insight into man's divided moral nature and how society should be organized in light of that nature. We commonly think of England as the home of representative government. We mostly fail to reflect that England enjoyed the

¹ See also Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

free institutions she transferred to her colonies, because they had been *retained* from the previous era, at a time when those institutions and the ideas that sustained them were being destroyed on the European continent by the revival of pagan notions of absolute kingship. English constitutional theory that “the king is under God—and under the law” was the essence of Christian teaching about the state, and it became the guiding precept in English common law. Moreover, the religious-political quarrels that would destroy the supremacy of the Stuarts resuscitated *medieval* theory even as those quarrels helped spark the great migration to the New World of the Puritans—Christian partisans who planted on the Western shore of the Atlantic that view of limited, constitutional government that, while consonant with covenant theology and sustaining an unabashedly religious worldview, also engendered political freedom (32-33).

The Glorious Revolution was called the “Protestant Wind” in England, and there were a number of counterparts to it in the colonies that were directed against colonial governors and councils. But, where English Whig-Protestants, in limiting the Royal prerogatives, moved over time towards the attribution of all power to Parliament—including the power to change the constitution itself—American Whig-Dis-senters never succumbed to that temptation. Stanley Katz has written that colonists emphasized the common-law tradition as a way to resist the authority to command that had been assumed by Parliament from Cromwell’s reign. Yet Americans also refused to

add without limit precedent upon precedent to the common law, if doing so would allow too much concentration of power in *any* part of the government. Americans remained true to their medieval heritage by delineating bounds to the exercise of power beyond which neither the king *nor* the Parliament could reach. Meanwhile, Britain’s adoption of the Imperial Reorganization policy following the French and Indian War led directly to conflict with the colonists. The policy radically changed Britain’s relationship with Anglo-America. It attempted to impose internal taxes there and to maintain a standing army for the collection of those taxes, as well as to restrict westward migration and settlement. All this was in the name of virtual representation by a Parliament that recognized no theoretical limits to its power. It was the logical policy outgrowth of a British political philosophy that had diverged sharply from the medieval tradition in the years since the early American colonization, marking a distinct departure from the adherence to Christian notions of limited government that had never gone out of fashion in the colonies. From the colonists’ point of view, therefore, the American Revolution was quintessentially conservative.

The real “Enlightenment” revolution was not the American but the French Revolution. Instead of being led by Christians imbued by their religion with a healthy skepticism toward unchecked power, it was led by disciples of Rousseau who, puffed up by a belief in man’s “natural goodness,” were hellbent on implementing unlimited popular sovereignty through the

mechanism of an untrammled legislative power. The river of blood that flowed from the guillotine did not stain American soil. No tyrant had to rise to quell ensuing chaos on American shores. Instead, Americans fulfilled the promise of their Revolution by establishing the Constitution, its written form intended to enshrine the moral values held by the people based on their religion as well as to prevent the gradual accretion of power by *any* agency or *any* level of government via the application of common-law precedent alone (311).

I agree with Gregory Pavlik that John Locke's social contract theory was important, certainly among the elite in America, and that Locke's theory represented an innovation relative to medieval contract theory, since it was based upon abstract logical assumptions. It nevertheless dovetailed neatly with the popular understanding of contracts between the people and their government, based upon agreement and concession, that had emerged from the medieval worldview. Instead of stressing the difference between Enlightenment and American medieval-based traditions, Evans might have emphasized how well the two actually reinforced each other as the sets of ideas commingled and integrated themselves in the America mind. Historians, some perhaps with ulterior motives, often find more hostility to religion in Enlightenment ideas than is warranted. Evans partially commits this error.

In America, Enlightenment ideas actually helped spark evangelical revivalism, in part because Americans rejected the more radical implications of

the doctrines of the European *philosophes* and strove to interpret Enlightenment ideas in the light of their own religious tradition. An example is the Great Awakening, which preceded the American Revolution and which had no counterpart outside the New World. In 1740, George Whitefield attracted some 4,000 people during a visit to Middletown, Connecticut; he cleared a twenty-mile radius of men and women, who literally dropped their tools and left the fields to go hear him preach. Thirty-five years later, officers of the Continental Army had Whitefield's body exhumed so they could bear pieces of his clothing into battle with them for a blessing of protection.² Ironically, while the founding of educational institutions is considered indicative of the Enlightenment influence of reason and science, the great Ivy League colleges founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America began as religious institutions intended to spread learning *and* the gospel.

Locke, who was steeped in Christian tradition, considered himself a Christian and wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* in 1695. His methods in that work bear a clear resemblance to certain theological views that gained wide acceptance in America, even among fundamentalist and evangelical sects.³ Most Ameri-

² Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 23-4.

³ Introduction by George W. Ewing in Regnery Gateway edition (1965), pp. xi and xvi.

cans had no more difficulty equating the New Testament God of Love with the Author of Reason than with the Author of Liberty. Daniel Boorstin—in a chapter entitled “The Mingling of Political and Religious Thought” in his 1953 book *The Genius of American Politics*—notes that Americans, unlike Europeans, mostly agreed on the ends their society should pursue. Because those ends were *spiritual*, Americans made society—outside the realm of formal politics and official coercion—the main arena in which questions about the evolution of social norms would be worked out.

It may be that the transmutation of politics into an arena for the determination of society’s ends—whether accomplished by democracy or by capitalism, by Freud, Darwin, Marx or the New Deal—has been the main source of the disintegration of American society. To the extent that this is true, it is likewise the case that Americans have removed themselves far from the constitutional framework as understood and originally established by the Founding Fathers. Hence American decline may be viewed as a failure to live *constitutionally*. The remedy may be to move toward recapturing the intent and spirit of the original Constitution, to reestablish it as the government’s fixed edifice and source of legitimacy. This, in order to let society, in recognition of man’s weaknesses of character and knowledge, work itself out, free from overweening governmental interference, by small steps and by trial and error over many years. Given the preeminent role of religious humility in the development of the constitutional ethic under-

lying the original American experiment, it is important to reassert the original interpretation of the First Amendment and, indeed, of the whole Bill of Rights. Sam Adams wrote in 1768 that “In all free states, the constitution is fixed.” One of the most glaring flaws in the English system addressed by the Constitutional Convention was that the English constitution was *not* fixed. Hence, operating on purely common-law assumptions, it might (and did) absorb precedents leading towards unfettered power (256). In the United States, we have allowed the Supreme Court to stretch the letter and intent of the Constitution, thereby imposing a modern and no less despotic version of the colonial-era British common law that our forebears rejected. We have failed to heed Jefferson’s warning not to make the Constitution “a blank paper by construction” (268).

A purely traditional or customary approach to the rule of law, because susceptible to willy-nilly change over time, will not adequately defend freedom. Rationalist approaches are even less capable of sustaining freedom because they lack even the presumption in favor of fixity that is part of a precedent-based legal system. A fixed constitution, Evans emphasizes, requires reference to substantive principles—“reference points anterior to, and controlling upon, the development of pure tradition. These reference points are ultimately religious and axiomatic in nature, and it is in the teachings of religion that we . . . [find] our freedom” (93-94).

Thorough research based on primary sources establishes clearly that ordinary

Americans' values originated not in classical republicanism or rationalist humanism, but in reformed Protestant Christianity.⁴ Neither were the elites predominantly drawn from the ranks of skeptics, secularists and "Deists." The vast majority of the Founders were church-going Christians. Excellent work buttressing this point has been done by M. E. Bradford, W. W. Sweet, and René de Visme Williamson. The First Amendment's injunction preventing the *national* Congress from creating an established religion did not bar the states from doing so. On the contrary, Madison's remarks in debates on the First Amendment reveal that a central purpose of the amendment was to prevent *Congress*—and, by logical extension, the entire federal government—from threatening the states' religious diversity, which ranged from sponsoring established churches in some instances to imposing doctrinal requirements of various sorts in others (282).

Massachusetts, for instance, maintained an established church until 1833. Significantly, the First Amendment's text as initially approved by the House came from Fisher Ames, a conservative from Massachusetts, who had no intention of undermining the established church of his state. The amendment's wording was modified in a conference committee before sending it to the Senate for a final vote. Roger Sherman and Oliver Ellsworth, stalwart Calvinists from Connecticut, worked on that com-

mittee project. At the time, their state had a law that fined anyone who did not go to church 50 shillings, and it is unlikely that they intended to force an end to this practice. Other states imposed similar requirements, and it is clear from the historical record that the disestablishment of official churches where it occurred was not the equivalent of modern secularism (277). One had to be Protestant to serve in the New Hampshire legislature until 1877. Roman Catholics could not hold office in North Carolina until 1835, in New Jersey until 1844. In Maryland, until 1826 one had to be Christian to hold office. As North Carolina "liberalized," it still required public officeholders to be Christian until 1868; thereafter, they had to profess a belief in God (278). Nor did the First Amendment prevent the appointment of chaplains or the establishment of Thanksgiving Day at the national level. In fact, it was the very day after Congress passed the First Amendment and sent it to the states for ratification that the House adopted the resolution calling for *a day of national prayer and thanksgiving* with language thanking God for the "opportunity peacefully to establish a constitutional government" (285).

Thomas Jefferson's words "wall of separation" have been used to support a series of Supreme Court decisions, beginning in 1962, that has placed severe restrictions on the public and ceremonial acknowledgment of America's religious traditions. Jefferson's phrase, from an 1802 letter, is taken totally out of context. One need only look at Jefferson's second inaugural address to discern his specific thoughts concerning

⁴ See Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

church-state relations in the federal Republic. There Jefferson declares that the free exercise of religion is independent of the *general* government under the Constitution; that is, Jefferson leaves religion as the Constitution found it, "under the direction or discipline of state or church authorities" (287). His interpretation squares with that of Madison. The "wall of separation," such as it was, was intended to prevent the federal government from impinging on the states' freedom to act on religious matters. It was not meant to be a barrier between the people and their religion.

Evans concludes *The Theme is Freedom* with an excellent bibliographical essay that, together with chapter notes, makes the book a valuable reference tool and a springboard to further study. The bibliography reflects voluminous work by some of the ablest historians and thinkers, showing a profound relationship between Christianity and the liberal tradition in Western civilization and in the United States particularly. Still, in order to remain vital, even ancient truths require modern formulations, and each new generation must rediscover for itself the record of its nation's past, in hopes of improving upon and reinvigorating enduring aspects of the legacy. Evans's book is a most impressive addition to the re-

quired literature.

William Craig Rice notes that too many professional historians have quit writing for anyone but themselves. Furthermore, they run an academic "closed shop," locking out young academics pursuing research outside so-called acceptable lines of inquiry.⁵ Having quit the ranks of teachers in any general sense, these narrow professionals have helped produce what independent historian David McCullough refers to as a "nation of historical illiterates." Today this nation of illiterates is in danger of forgetting the history that made American freedom possible. In matters connecting religion and politics, as well as much else, what passes for American constitutional tradition in the minds of many is actually a mish-mash of mistaken notions and deliberate misinformation that more nearly stands that tradition on its head. *The Theme is Freedom*, combining the imaginative breadth and eye for detail of the historian of ideas with the clarity of expression that has made Evans one of the nation's most respected journalists, is a major contribution to a much-needed project of remembrance and renewal.

⁵ "Who Killed History? An Academic Autopsy," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1995).