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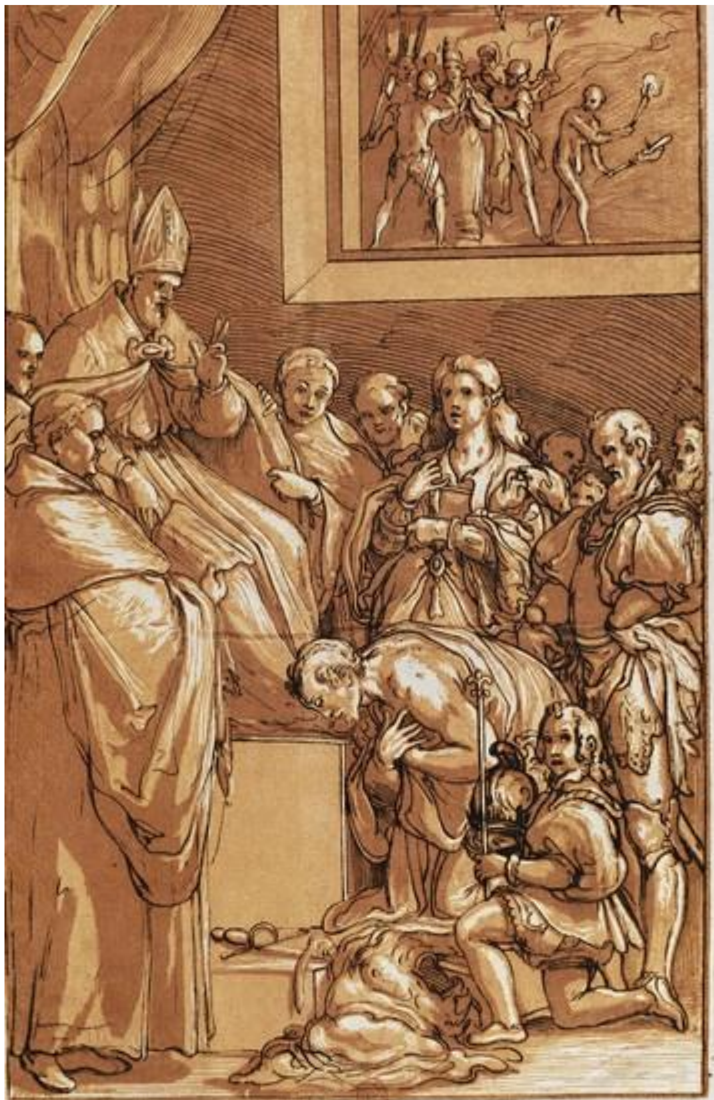
Where ‘I’ Comes From

The Western understanding of individual liberty derives from Christianity itself, not from a reaction against it.

by David Gress



Holy Roman Emperor Henri IV at the feet of Pope Gregory VII in 1077. Gregory lifted Henry’s excommunication after this act of penance, though their quarrel continued. Bridgeman Images

'What is the West about?" asks Larry Siedentop, an emeritus fellow of Keble College, Oxford. Years of reflecting on the character of Western societies lead him to an answer that resembles the one given by most political thinkers: namely, that the West is about liberty, with official authority deriving from the people themselves and with official institutions having only a limited say in the conduct of the citizen and the course of society. But Mr. Siedentop's full answer is unusual. In "Inventing the Individual," he asks where the Western understanding of liberty comes from and finds—unlike most political thinkers—that its source is Christianity.

This part of the answer, as Mr. Siedentop notes, may prove irritating, because it flies in the face of the comfortable idea that democratic liberty, like modern science, grew out of the 18th-century Enlightenment and, in particular, out of the Enlightenment's struggle against a reactionary and oppressive church. Not so, he says. Western freedom centers on the notion of the responsible individual endowed with a sovereign conscience and unalienable rights, and that notion emerged, in stages, during the centuries between Paul the Apostle and the churchmen of the Middle Ages.

Mr. Siedentop begins his analytical narrative by contrasting ancient ideas of family and cosmos with the ideas provoked by early Christianity. In the ancient world, he says, the individual did not exist as such. Everyone had his place within a hierarchy, which in turn determined all aspects of existence. The core unit was the family, ruled by the "paterfamilias." Similarly, the fundamental maxim of Roman law was to "give each his due," which meant assigning to each a particular status within the all-encompassing web of social and legal norms: the father as ruler of the family, the emperor as ruler of the state and its people, and the slave as a "human tool" subject to the will of his owner. Roman law presumed indelible distinctions: slave-free, citizen-alien, master-follower.

Christianity, as preached by St. Paul in the first century and by St. Augustine in the fourth, promised something quite different, and revolutionary. "In Paul's writings," Mr. Siedentop writes, "we see the emergence of a new sense of justice, founded on the assumption of moral equality rather than on natural inequality." A Christian idea of individual dignity, Mr. Siedentop says, led to what we call the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This notion incorporated a new principle of justice and fatally undermined the idea of "giving each his due." Only a century after Paul, a church father could write that "one mighty deed alone," meaning the incarnation, "was sufficient for our God to bring freedom to the human person."

The old ideas of natural inequality were hard to reverse. The first stage of the reversal, according to Mr. Siedentop, began in early Christianity, and it reached its fruition in the Carolingian Empire nine centuries later. The empire's rulers relied heavily on churchmen, who carried the torch of literacy and encouraged the imperial elite to combine its secular work of governance with the "cure of souls"—a care and respect for the moral stature of individual subjects.

The second stage of the reversal, Mr. Siedentop says, began with the church reform launched by the Benedictine order in the 10th century. It culminated in the so-called papal revolution of the 11th. Spearheaded by a series of remarkable popes, such as Leo IX and Gregory VII, this revolution aimed at securing the independence of the papacy. Hitherto, secular rulers had

claimed the right to "invest"—that is, appoint—bishops, including the pope himself, and through these appointments to control the church's property and legal decisions. In a ringing declaration, Gregory asserted that the pope was subject to no earthly ruler's jurisdiction, that he had the right to depose emperors, and that he alone could issue general laws "according to the needs of the time."

The pope, in other words, was asserting a universal jurisdiction, a claim that Mr. Siedentop sees as the origin of the later doctrine of sovereignty. It began as a defense of the "liberty of the Church" and ended in our modern theory of state sovereignty and, over time, the sovereignty of the free individual. Mr. Siedentop ventures to call Gregory's idea of papal sovereignty "a constitution for Europe." Drawing on a substantial volume of scholarship, he shows how Roman law, revived in the medieval period, was newly read in the light of Christian teaching and how canon law came to anchor the idea of the individual in both churchly and secular courts.

The figures who animate Mr. Siedentop's narrative include canonists, the experts in church law who, he believes, became the first political theorists of Europe, and the great thinkers from the Franciscan order, especially William of Ockham. It was Ockham who taught, in the 14th century, that each thing in the world is what it is and not merely, as ancient philosophy had taught, the reflection or expression of a universal idea possessed of a higher and truer reality. Ockham's ideas exalted human reasoning about the world, gave further dignity to the individual conscience and marked a decisive stage in the invention of the individual. It could be argued that one name is missing from Mr. Siedentop's impressive cast of writers and thinkers—that of Dante, who was not only Christendom's greatest poet but a prominent theorist of the secular state. In "On Monarchy," he declared that "freedom of the will" was "the greatest gift conferred by God on human nature."

By the end of the Middle Ages, Mr. Siedentop shows, the reversal of the old order was nearly complete. The default norm was now the idea of the individual with a conscience and rights, which led to "Christian moral institutions being turned against authoritarian forms of both church and state." The result was a series of rebellions against kingly despotism and, in the Reformation, against the broad authority of the church itself. The road to democracy and modern freedom lay open, Mr. Siedentop says, and could never be fully or finally blocked.

With "Inventing the Individual," Mr. Siedentop is not trying to reveal a hidden or suppressed religious impulse in Western modernity but rather attempting to trace a lost genealogy. He sees modern secularism, and its freedoms, as Christianity's gift to human society. When Thomas Jefferson wrote that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," he clearly thought that the truths were self-evident. But Christianity made them self-evident.

—Mr. Gress is the author of "From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents."

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