WHAT HATH JERUSALEM TO DO WITH ATHENS?

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The third-century Church Father Tertullian once famously posed the question, “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Arguing against the efforts of early Christian thinkers to construct a “mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition,” Tertullian spurned human philosophy as fraught with error and deceit: On Mount Zion, the one true God gave his definitive revelation through Christ; man no longer has need for the vain wisdom of the Areopagus.

Pace Tertullian, the great thrust of the Catholic tradition, beginning with Scripture itself, affirms the contrary, namely that the human person’s natural intellectual capacities enable him to make sense of the world and aspire to a comprehensive understanding of reality. Moreover, divine grace elevates those capacities, leading man to commune with the Triune God in knowledge and in love. Thus, Athens hath indeed everything to do with Jerusalem, for the great Athenian pursuit of philosophic wisdom sought to understand every cranny of the cosmos into which Wisdom himself became incarnate for our redemption. In the end, there is one truth, even if dispensed through two orders, natural and supernatural.
As in the speculative realm, so in the political realm, where today, in our thoroughly secular age, many ask the inverse of Tertullian's conundrum: "What hath Jerusalem to do with Athens?" Or, in modern parlance, "what has your religion to do with my politics?"—a question whose very formulation presupposes the problem of pluralism and the fear of religious imposition. The ancient Israelites, after all, strived to live the theocracy established in the Old Covenant, while the Athenians are heralded as progenitors of modern liberal democracy. Moreover, the enduring pall of Enlightenment skepticism, which exalted reason at the expense of faith and thus cast doubt upon the knowability or verity of revealed truth claims, has effectively cordoned off religion as a private, personal affair unworthy of consideration in the political arena. In its wake has ascended postmodern activism, which disposes of Enlightenment rationality and classical religion in its quest for total social revolution according to an intersectional race-gender paradigm.

Religion and politics in the contemporary world, then, appear locked in prolonged dissonance, incapable of harmonic resolution. Yet Christian revelation and the Catholic intellectual tradition provide a coherent, reasonable model that, in its compatibilism, is able both to reclaim a genuinely sacred reverence for politics and to maintain the Church's distinct, higher charge to work for the salvation of the world. Even though ecclesial life pertains to supernatural affairs and politics to natural affairs, the two orders—one of grace and one of nature—are united in their single source and end: God. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God, both natural and supernatural (Rom 13:1). Any attempt, then, to segregate the ecclesial and political domains as incompatible or possessing irreconcilable ends undermines the fundamental unity of faith and reason and, even more, the fundamental unity of reality. At root, a Catholic approach to politics cannot but be God-oriented because the cosmos in which all politics takes place is God-oriented. Sans God, all of being—let alone politics—vanishes.
**Analogia Legis**

In the great treasury of Catholic reflection on nature, grace, and political life, a gem is to be found in St. Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of law in the *Prima Secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae*. There, Aquinas addresses law after having already traversed a thorough discussion of God, creation, and creation’s inexorable orientation to return to God. This extensive prelude contextualizes law as a pedagogue that both reveals to man the order of reality and calls him to collaborate in God’s governance of reality through his participation in God’s own rational life. Politics can never truly depart from metaphysics.

Aquinas thus develops his account of law according to a fourfold analogical hierarchy, akin to his well-known *analogia entis* (“analogy of being”), which tracks the ontological continuity between God and all of created reality, even to the tiniest tittle. Since Aquinas’s doctrine of law is grounded in his doctrine of being, we can speak of an *analogia legis* (“analogy of law”), whereby law, like being, declines across the hierarchical order of reality. The prime analogate and font of all law is the eternal law, which is the eternal wisdom of God. Supremely reasonable, good, regal, and communicable (corresponding to the four notes of Aquinas’s definition of law, *ST* I-II, q. 90), God cannot but legislate rightly over himself and whatever he should choose to create, for such wisdom and justice are identical with his very nature.

In the order of creation, the eternal law is promulgated according to the aforementioned nature-grace distinction. On the one hand is the “natural law,” the manifestation of God’s eternal wisdom through the creation of “nature”—the natural order—which, as Scripture attests (e.g., Rom 1:19; Wis 13), man is capable of discovering by his own rational capacities. Aquinas notes further that the first precept of the natural law (“do good and avoid evil”) and its attendant commands (e.g., honor thy father and mother, do not kill, do not steal) are known *statim et per se* (“immediately and in themselves”): These precepts are intuitive—derived from
our basic natural inclinations to preserve life, to reproduce and rear young, to know, and to love.

On the other hand is the "divine law," which is the graced dispensation of the eternal law. Divine law gives man an epistemic boost, enabling him to know those things of the eternal law which either transcend natural reason or are obscured from it by the intellectual haze inherited from the Fall. Hence we find in the Ten Commandments revealed to Moses a divine law containing a "privileged expression" of the natural law (CCC 2070). Even more, in Christ, we are given the "new law" of grace, which is the Holy Spirit, who has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5) and leads us in righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ (Rom 5:21). The promulgation of this law, which transcends the scope and jurisdiction of the state, is the chief evangelical charge of the Church.

The final legal declension that Aquinas presents is "human law," often known in the modern world as "positive law." Whereas the natural law extends the first precept of practical reason ("do good and avoid evil") to general moral precepts that govern human action in any and all circumstances, human law extends that first precept of practical reason to the unique circumstances of local jurisdictions. Human law, which obtains its legitimacy from and therefore must always accord with the natural law (and, a fortiori, the eternal law), addresses questions of the economy, immigration, the environment, public health, defense, etc., as well as basic administrative logistics, and thus its precepts are rightly subject to much debate, especially in a vibrant democracy. How exactly to "do good and avoid evil" in response to the gamut of prudential questions pertaining to the civic common good is precisely what should drive the world of politics. But for Aquinas and, certainly, for the Catholic tradition, third-rail American political issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, and special protections for self-constructed gender identities are not principally questions for human law; rather, the natural law, accessible to human reason, clearly proscribes them, and thus it is incumbent upon lawmakers
to follow suit, pursuing positive legislation and enforcement however prudentially possible. A rightly ordered society never positively legislates (or enforces by way of executive orders or judicial rulings) activity that contradicts the natural law, for such a law, order, or ruling, by defying the first mark of law—that it be in accord with right (eternal) reason—is no law at all.

Aquinas’s cosmological analogia legis is instructive for our understanding of the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens because it elucidates how every lawful authority—natural and divine—proceeds from one source. The Lord himself tells Pilate: You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above (Jn 19:11). Every ruler, whether legislator, president, or judge, monarch, lord, or general, is accountable to a naturally knowable law, which is the basis for his very authority to enact positive law. Hence, all true law—and the political order that it governs—is metaphysically tethered to God and ergo operates according to the same exitus-reditus schema of all created being: It proceeds forth from the mind of God in his act of creation, guides man unto virtue through his rational participation therein, and, in grace, elevates man to return to God in glory.

**Sanctifying Our Earthly Citizenship**

The great challenge of balancing ecclesial and political life is the fundamentally liminal character of Christian existence. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), but we endure life in earthen vessels afflicted by sin (2 Cor 4:7). Still, the Lord himself reveals the distinction between the natural and supernatural spheres of governance in his exhortation to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s (Mt 22:21; Mk 12:17). And since God’s commandments are not burdensome (1 Jn 5:3), we ought to understand the task of reconciling the temporal and eternal political orders to be practicable.

In our day, two starkly opposed models of Catholic citizenship and ecclesial-political relations present themselves
as responses to this challenge. The first is a Catholic natural law democracy—to be duly distinguished from theocracy—that respects the basic harmony between nature and grace and the common eternal foundation of the political order’s natural-human law and the ecclesial order’s divine law. The two orders have distinct jurisdictions but overlapping constituencies, which means that, in a thoroughly evangelized culture, Jerusalem and Athens work together, though still not explicitly, to form a coherent, unified society ordered toward God. The state, by prescribing human laws derived from or in accord with the natural law, steers citizens to realize their natural desires to unite in the political common good and to seek the truth about God, which creates a culture disposed to cooperate with grace and grow in supernatural virtue. Nevertheless, the state recognizes that it cannot legislate over supernatural matters—precepts proceeding from the divine law—because such matters extend beyond its competency. Theocracy is thereby avoided, and religious liberty is preserved, save for “religions” that violate the natural law (e.g., satanic worship). Meanwhile, the Church, ordered by the divine law, sanctifies and elevates the natural political order. Grace elevates and perfects nature: Faith elevates and perfects reason, and the Church, the heavenly polity, elevates and perfects the citizenry and its political leaders, who comprise the temporal polity. The fruit of this synergy is genuine peace.

The opposing model is that of modern liberalism, which elevates the pragmatic concern for pluralistic rapprochement over the pursuit of metaphysical coherence. Liberalism aims to secure political and social stability so that individual citizens can pursue their own ends according to their own purposes within parameters that preserve said stability. Liberalism thus appears indifferent to religion, but in reality, such practical indifference amounts to metaphysical skepticism about the place for religion in the political order. At one level, religion’s claims to exogenous supernatural authority appear circumspect to liberalism, though at another, religion’s strong moral prescriptions can foster relative
social peace and prolong the republic. John Adams conveys this latter perspective in a 1798 letter: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People” and “cannot contend with human Passions unbridled by morality and religion.” But there are deeper implications here: Metaphysics and religion in liberal democracy are rendered subservient to the state, valuable insofar as they are bridles of passion and instruments of tranquility. In the face of pluralism, truth is placed in tension with and thus subordinated to order, as opposed to being understood properly as the cause of order. The liberal state and its constitution are in themselves unconcerned with the philosophical or theological source of said “moral” people, so long as socio-political circumstances remain relatively pacific. Socio-political stability is the highest value. Hence, if cultural mores change—as they in fact have, and rapidly at that—religion may no longer be deemed important for sustaining the social contract; secularist moral fonts could suffice, even supplanting religious traditions (and their metaphysical apparatuses) deemed too archaic or inimical to newly conceived “individual rights” (abortion, same-sex marriage, etc.) that run contrary to classical accounts of reality.

In such a world—indeed, today and throughout our country’s history—the Church is relegated to one mediating civil institution among many, caught in a struggle to justify her place, to make an *apologia* that she does contribute to social life in a political paradigm whose roots are decidedly not those of the Catholic natural law tradition. Unlike the Catholic natural law paradigm, wherein the Church’s role is self-evident, since the political authorities possess a vision of reality that is metaphysically consonant with, yet cosmically narrower than, that of the Church, liberal pragmatism requires that the Church justify her social utility in strictly non-metaphysical, political terms, such as with statistics about the material works of her institutions—the measurable successes of hospitals, inner-city schools, homeless shelters, and so forth. For liberalism, the clarity and depth of the Church’s metaphysical vision, let alone her charge and capacity to
Second, this paradigm proposes a model for Catholic politics in a secular age.

For all that we have said, the obvious improbability of the natural law democratic paradigm in our age need not render it a merely hypothetical affair. First, such an exploration deepens our ecclesial and political self-understanding vis-à-vis modern liberal democracy, which, for now, remains regnant in the West. The account of Catholic political life sketched out above is literally, by its nature, an “integralist” project for its pursuit of a political and ecclesial integrity that is founded upon the more fundamental metaphysical integrity of reality. Yet we live in an anti-metaphysical, post-truth age, which predominantly rejects belief in God and the prospect of objective morality. Hence, this paradigm—which, it must be said, repudiates an explicit Church-state coalition—is unintelligible to our modern and postmodern peers. As the late Francis Cardinal George observed in Catholicism and America, “the natural moral law has become a Catholic tag word,” and “bringing it up transforms any argument into a religious argument” (5)—not because the natural law belongs to the properly supernatural domain of religion but because our contemporaries deny the capacity of human reason to know such a law, thinking it instead a clever proxy for imposing religiously revealed morality. Thus, natural law arguments defending the dignity of human life from conception until natural death and the integrity of natural marriage, correct though they be, hold almost no traction in public debate. It is actually as if, per Aquinas, the natural law has been “blotted out” of a large portion of our culture, particularly in regard to issues of life and sexual morality (see ST I-II, q. 94, a. 6).

Second, this paradigm proposes a model for Catholic citizenship that redounds even to our spiritual benefit, for the Jerusalem-Athens political concord mirrors the Jerusalem-Athens spiritual concord of faith and reason, the “two wings on which the
human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (Fides et Ratio, epigraph). Though we may not see such ecclesial-civic concord in our day, Catholics must still recognize, as Michael Hanby has noted (First Things, March 2020), the need to establish a Jerusalem-Athens harmony within the soul (à la Plato’s Republic) and thereby recover “a mystical vision, an intellectual apprehension of God at the innermost heart of reality.” This is a matter of seeing God’s purposes at work both in nature and in grace and cultivating an interior reverence for them that permeates our whole existence: our families and our friendships, our political, professional, and community engagements, and our apostolic endeavors. What emerges is a genuinely integrated human life, one which aspires to the beatitude for which we are made.

This, of course, is difficult, but it is also our via crucis, the path set before us to the heavenly Jerusalem. Christ came to bear witness to the truth (Jn 18:37), and we, baptized into his death and resurrection, are to follow in his footsteps, drinking the chalice which he drank (Mt 20:22). Dignitatis Humanae, the Second Vatican Council’s document on religious liberty and the Church’s place in a pluralistic society, is emphatic about the Church’s vocation to be the teacher of truth in the modern world: “The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, even more fully to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it” (14). Thus, our mission. Interiorly, we cultivate the chapel of the Jerusalem-Athens alliance, which overflows into an exterior confidence that Athens can truly flourish only when Jerusalem is made present in its midst. We thereby sow the seeds of grace, trusting in its agile power to till even the rocky soil of modern liberalism and appealing to the human person’s inexorable natural inclinations for truth and love—for God—no matter how hard one might try to suppress them. We seek the legislation of the natural law however possible, and following St. Paul, we subject ourselves to the governing authorities, remaining ever aware that we express our fidelity to both Athens and Jerusalem by obeying said authorities
insofar as their ordinances accord with the natural law. But when push comes to shove, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29), which cues a more felicitous Tertullian quote: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” For our citizenship is in heaven, and though our feet be planted in Athens, our gaze is to be ever turned to Mount Zion—that in the fullness of time, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess to the glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10–11).

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