

**RERUM NOVARUM AND THE TENTH FEDERALIST:
ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND AMERICAN LIBERALISM
ON THE POLITICS OF CLASS**

Carson Holloway
Concord College

*Is man fundamentally a moral and religious being, as Pope Leo XIII insists in *Rerum Novarum*? Or, is man a being fundamentally driven by a desire for material gain, as is asserted by Thomas Hobbes and James Madison? This article argues that Leo's view of humanity is the more accurate one, and that implies problems for the underlying ideas of the American regime. Rather than seeing religion as too weak to restrain man's desire for gain, as does Madison (and the American Republic), Leo understood that religion can be a powerful force for drawing society to a high level of moral rectitude.*

Introduction

Human beings seem to have one foot planted in each world. Created in the image and likeness of God, that is, with an immortal soul and capable of knowing the unchanging truth, we also exist in time, that is, in concrete historical circumstances. Yet we know that the eternal takes precedence over the present. Hence our uniquely human capacity and duty to evaluate the latter in the light of the former, to judge our own in the light of the truth.

For Americans, and particularly for those interested in politics (and all members of a democratic community are presumably obligated to be so interested), this task involves examining their own regime in the light of Catholic social teaching. Perhaps a useful beginning to such an inquiry can be found in a comparison of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, or *On the Condition of the Working Classes*, and James Madison's *Tenth Federalist*. Both are foundational for the respective traditions of reflection to which they belong. The former is commonly acknowledged to be the fountainhead of modern Catholic social teaching, just as the latter is usually accepted as among the most important works explicating the political thought of the American Founders and the regime constructed on the basis of that thought. Moreover, both treat a similar political theme, the question of how to attain justice between different

economic classes, and both do so in the light of philosophic reflection on the more profound question of the nature of man.

As we will see, our comparison reveals striking similarities as well as distinct differences. It also suggests that the latter may be more profound than the former. Thus it raises questions about the commonly asserted harmony of modern Catholic social teaching and the American tradition of liberalism.

Points of Agreement

Both Leo and Madison are concerned with injustice and social conflict arising from differences of economic interest. *Federalist Ten* speaks, as is well known, of the dangers of faction, understood as some segment of the community “united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”¹ Faction, as it turns out, results primarily from differences of economic interest and tends to introduce “injustice” and instability into public life.² Faction is the typical disease of popular government and, Madison believes, must be addressed somehow because of its very real capacity to discredit, destabilize, and ultimately destroy that otherwise desirable regime.

Similarly, *Rerum Novarum’s* point of departure is Leo’s observation of a “raging” social “conflict” arising from the fact that the “majority of the working class” is subjected “unjustly” to “misery and wretchedness.”³ Further, just as Madison fears faction’s capacity to destroy democracy, so Leo seems concerned that the economic conflict he observes will result in some radical, and radically undesirable, social transformation. Thus while Madison suggests that the problem of faction must be solved lest the victory go to the “adversaries of liberty,”⁴ Leo indicates that his attempt to address the difficulties of his day is rendered dangerous by the fact that “crafty agitators are making use” of the differences between “capital and labor” to “pervert men’s judgments and stir the people up to revolt.”⁵ In particular, Leo fears the triumph of socialism, with its denial of private property and the private family.

Leo’s opposition to socialism, moreover, points to a significant point of agreement between his analysis and Madison’s: the importance of the maintenance of private property, even when its distribution is unequal. The right to property, Madison suggests, arises from men’s faculties of acquisition. Yet those faculties are evidently unequal, and the natural result is the acquisition of different amounts and kinds of property. Government’s “first object” is the “protection of these faculties” and, presumably, the resulting economic inequalities.⁶ Thus Madison later labels a legally enforced “equal distribution of property” as a “wicked” and “improper project.”⁷

In a similar vein, *Rerum Novarum* insists upon the natural status of the right to private ownership of property and insists that nature also decrees that such property be divided unequally. In reasoning that runs parallel to Madison's, Leo contends that "[t]here naturally exist among mankind manifold differences in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition."⁸ Thus Leo repudiates socialism and reaffirms "the duty of safeguarding private property by legal enactment and protection," noting that "neither justice nor the common good allows" one, "under the futile and shallow pretext of equality, to lay violent hands on other people's possessions."⁹

Points of Disagreement: Ends and Means

Further examination of Leo's and Madison's teachings, however, reveals serious differences between them, differences regarding what ends society should pursue in trying to address this conflict as well as what means should be employed in seeking those ends. *Federalist Ten* considers the possibility of ending faction "by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests," but it famously concludes that such a project is hopelessly "impracticable."¹⁰ The "causes of faction cannot be removed" and "relief is only to be sought in controlling its effects."¹¹

In stark contrast, in *Rerum Novarum* Leo forthrightly indicates his desire to eliminate the conflict between the economic classes. Having offered his critique of socialism and his accompanying account of the importance of private property, Leo proceeds to promise "to show where the remedy" to the relevant difficulties "might be found."¹² And unlike Madison, whose "cure" for faction turns out to be not so much a cure as merely a method of "controlling" the "violence" of the symptoms, Leo really believes in the possibility of a cure or remedy to social and economic conflict.¹³ Thus the subsequent discussion reveals Leo's conviction that, through the application of the proper principles, the classes can be induced to respect each other's rights, to treat each other with "friendliness and good feeling," and even with "brotherly love."¹⁴

In seeking to control the violence of faction, Madison places his confidence in the proper organization of government institutions. Thus he suggests at the beginning of *Federalist Ten* that the achievement of this end is promised by the means of "a well constructed union."¹⁵ Specifically, salvation from faction lies in the principle of representation, which, by allowing for an extended republic with a diversity of economic interests, promises simultaneously to hinder the formation of a faction sufficiently numerous to oppress its rivals and to render such a faction, should it appear, too dispersed for its members to be aware of their strength and able to cooperate.

Leo, on the other hand, says nothing about government structures as a way of solving the conflict and instead emphasizes the moral influence of religion. The misery of the working class, Leo contends, and hence the conflict it spawns, arose in the first place in part because “[p]ublic institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion.” Later, in beginning his account of the remedy to the situation, Leo insists that “no practical solution of this question will be found apart from the intervention of religion and the Church.” He then goes on to suggest that “there is no intermediary more powerful than religion . . . in drawing the rich and working classes together, by reminding each of its duties to the other, and especially of the obligations of justice.”¹⁶ As his argument proceeds, Leo similarly asserts the efficacy of religion in fostering the even higher social goals mentioned before, the inter-class friendship and charity that go beyond mere justice and respect for rights.¹⁷

Indeed, the conflict between Madison and Leo on this question is so apparent that at some points their arguments seem almost to address each other directly. Thus while Leo insists upon religion’s efficacy, Madison contends that “we well know that neither religious nor moral motives can be relied upon as an adequate control” on the actions of those in whom the “impulse and opportunity” for injustice coincide.¹⁸ Madison even notes that religion, far from being the solution, is itself often the cause of factious conflict.¹⁹ Conversely, while Madison relies on an institutional scheme the ingenuity and novelty of which he was no doubt fully aware (as the conventional wisdom held that popular government could only be established securely on a small scale), Leo warns that “all men should rest persuaded that the main thing needed is to re-establish Christian morals, apart from which all the plans and devices of the wisest will prove of little avail.”²⁰

The Madisonian Anthropology

The aforementioned differences point to disagreements on fundamental questions, which in turn suggest the deficiency, at least from the perspective of *Rerum Novarum*, of Madison’s account in *Federalist Ten*. Madison’s erroneous sociology, his belief that the classes must be in conflict, that there is no cure for faction, arises from an erroneous anthropology, a mistaken because incomplete understanding of human nature.

The relationship between Madison’s and Leo’s anthropologies first comes to light when we compare their respective comments about the relationship between human nature and human conflict. Madison famously asserts that the “causes of faction” are “sown in the nature of man,” arising from the inequalities in wealth that naturally result from men’s naturally unequal capacities for acquisition.²¹ In contrast, Leo considers it a “great mistake” to

“take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict.” Indeed, such a view is so “irrational” and “false” as to be directly contrary to the truth. In reality, Leo argues, nature intends the harmonious cooperation of the economically unequal classes of society: “Just as the symmetry of the human frame is the result of the suitable arrangement of the different parts of the body, so in a State is it ordained by nature that the two classes should dwell in harmony and agreement, so as to maintain the balance of the body politic. Each needs the other: capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital. Mutual agreement results in the beauty of good order, while perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and savage barbarity.”²²

Whereas Leo aligns the Church’s social teaching with the typically classical view that human beings are naturally sociable, that nature intends different kinds of people to cooperate with a view to their mutual well being, Madison appears to adopt the typically modern, in fact Hobbesian, view that human beings are by nature in a state of conflict or war. The Hobbesian character of Madison’s account becomes more clear if we consider the similarities between his and Hobbes’s treatments of the three parts of the soul identified in Plato’s *Republic*: rational, spirited, and desiring.

In the *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates contends that in every human being there is a desiring element that takes pleasure in the satisfaction of bodily appetite, and that also desires, as a tool necessary to the fulfillment of its aims, money; a spirited element that takes pleasure in glory or honor or victory; and a rational element that takes pleasure in the truth. Socrates moreover argues that a kind of peace or harmony is by nature possible on the basis of the rational elements rule in the soul and in the city. Reason, it seems, is capable of knowing things in light of which one can place limits on the desires of the other parts of the soul, which when unchecked tend to lead to conflict.

Hobbes, recognizing the same elements in human nature, though not consistently using the same names, views them in a very different light. Whereas Plato suggests that the archenemy of peace, or the prime instigator of social conflict, is the desiring element, the infinity of the bodily appetites of which causes men unjustly to seek the property of others, and that reason secures peace by its capacity to know goods compared to which bodily pleasure pales to relative insignificance, Hobbes suggests nearly the opposite: that reason causes conflict while bodily appetite can be turned to peace.

In Chapter 17 of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses the causes that human beings, unlike certain other animals, cannot naturally live together in peace. He identifies six such causes, two of which expressly identify man’s capacity for reason as the source of conflict. Other

“creatures, having not (as man) the use of reason, do not see, nor think they see any fault, in the administration of their common business: whereas amongst men, there are very many, that think themselves wiser, and abler to govern the Publique, better than the rest; and these strive to reform and innovate, one this way, another that way; and thereby bring it into Distraction and Civill Warre.”

Again, other animals, while they have “some use of voice, in making known to one another their desires, and other affections; yet they want that art of words, by which some men can represent to others, that which is Good, in the likeness of Evil; and Evil, in the likeness of Good; and augment, or diminish the apparent greatness of Good and Evil; discontenting men, and troubling their Peace at their pleasure.”²³

Spiritedness comes off no better in this discussion, as it also accounts for two of the six reasons that men are naturally inclined to fight. Unlike other animals, “men are continually in competition for Honor and Dignity,” and “consequently amongst men there ariseth on that ground, Envy and Hatred, and finally Warre.” Similarly, among other creatures the pursuit of private benefit automatically results in the common good, whereas “man, whose joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men, can relish nothing but what is eminent.”²⁴

In contrast, this passage suggests that bodily appetite is compatible with peace. Thus Hobbes’s observation that the sociability of some animals rests upon the fact that their capacity to communicate is limited to “voice,” to the communication of “desires” and “affections.”²⁵ Thus his comment that “irrational creatures,” because of their inability to “distinguish between *Injury* and *Dammage*,” are “not offended with their fellows” so “long as they be at ease.”²⁶

This understanding of bodily appetite, and the related desire for economic gain, as the basis of peace also appears in Hobbes’s celebrated account of the “Natural Condition of Mankind” in Chapter 13 of the *Leviathan*. There, to be sure, the desire for gain, for the goods that make for the security and comfort of the body, is at first presented, along with the thirst for glory, as a cause of war. Yet this judgment of bodily desire is qualified at the end of the chapter, when Hobbes asserts that the “Passions that incline men to Peace, are Fear of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them.”²⁷ Bodily appetite and the desire for gain, it seems, can cause conflict but can also be turned to peace.

Reason also shares in this rehabilitation, although with a crucial qualification: it can be conducive to peace so long as it limits itself to reflecting on how best to secure the framework in which we can enjoy the appetites of the body. Any more ambitious aim will lead necessarily to confusion and deception,

since, as Hobbes insists, there is no “right Reason constituted by Nature.”²⁸ But, in the context of our desire for the things “necessary to commodious living,” reason can suggest “convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement.”²⁹

Madison’s account of the parts of the soul, or the elements of human nature, runs parallel to Hobbes’s to a remarkable extent. The most notable characteristic of reason, Madison suggests, is its fallibility, its incapacity to know anything with sufficient surety to bring men to agreement. Hence it is a source of discord: “different opinions will be formed.” Similarly, spiritedness, or what Madison here refers to as “self-love,” tends to attach itself to the (probably erroneous) conclusions of reason, to one’s opinions, which, necessarily differing from those of many others, serves to heighten the natural conflict that exists among men.

Madison also follows Hobbes in attributing to bodily desire and the desire for gain, which Madison refers to as “interest,” a capacity to cause conflict. Hence the aforementioned assertion that diversity of interest necessarily begets faction, and indeed that interest is “the most common and durable source of faction.”³⁰ Yet interest also undergoes a kind of subtle rehabilitation in the course of *Federalist Ten*’s argument. For though it gives rise to conflict, Madison evidently believes with Hobbes that such conflict, unlike that arising from the other parts of the soul, can be managed and even turned to peace. Thus Madison’s contention that the “regulation” of “various and interfering” economic “interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of government.”³¹ But such a turn also implies a partial rehabilitation of reason as conducive to peace, again so long as it takes on the relatively humble role of merely calculating about how to secure material interests. Indeed, the whole argument of *Federalist Ten* implicitly attributes this capacity to calculating reason: Madison surely intends to persuade his audience that their interests will be more secure under the extended republic he proposes.

Ultimately, the Hobbesian/Madisonian anthropology turns out not to be, in the strict sense, an anthropology at all: It is an account of human nature in which the distinctively human, reason, is subordinated and all but disappears. Reason, it seems, can know nothing with any certainty, except, that is, for the things that conduce to the well being of our subrational, subhuman element, the desires of the body and the longing for economic gain that accompanies them. Man is just a clever animal.

Thus Madison, in contending that interest is the most common and durable source of faction, suggests that human beings are driven primarily by material interests. Thus his suggestion that concern for justice and the common good have no force in the human soul, that morality and religion cannot restrain

those who have opportunity and impulse to oppress others.³² Thus his insistence that men cannot be given the same opinions and passions precisely because of reason's impotence to know the truth outside the realm of material self-interest. Such teachings add up to the notion that the thoughts, as Hobbes famously asserts, are but scouts and spies for the passions, which Madison comes very close to expressly embracing, as when he insists that in any dispute a man's material "interest would certainly" — that is, not "might" or "probably will," but "must" — "bias his judgment."³³

Leo's Christian Anthropology

The account of human nature underlying Madison's analysis in *Federalist Ten* diverges considerably from that proposed by Leo in the course of his discussion of the remedy for conflict in *Rerum Novarum*. The differences between them can perhaps be approached best by returning for a moment to the point on which they agree and then seeing how and why they subsequently diverge. Both contend, recall, that economic inequality is the natural result of the natural inequality of faculties among men. Yet they draw radically different conclusions from this fact. Immediately after asserting that "the protection of different faculties of acquiring property" results in "the possession of different degrees and kinds of property," Madison concludes that the "causes of faction are sown into the nature of man."³⁴ Conversely, immediately after positing that "unequal fortune" is the "necessary result of unequal condition" with regard to "capacity, skill, strength, and health" among men,³⁵ and that this in turn results in certain unavoidable "pains and hardships"³⁶ (presumably especially for those who are able to acquire less), Leo nevertheless not only declines to draw Madison's conclusion, but in fact denies it outright and asserts the opposite as the truth: it is a "great mistake," he says, "to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict."³⁷

Why do Leo and Madison arrive at such starkly incompatible conclusions on the basis of such similar convictions about the natural status of economic inequality? Simply, because Madison implicitly assumes that the appetite for acquisition of property is unlimited, while Leo does not. And this difference in turn results from the fact that Madison suggests that reason cannot reliably know any goods besides material ones, while Leo contends that it can. Ultimately, this difference in turn arises from Madison's apparent belief that appetite for acquisition is the dominant element in human nature, while Leo thinks otherwise.

The friendliness of classes that Leo hopes to achieve, he makes clear, is made possible by the comparative denigration of material interests on the basis of superior goods that reason is capable of knowing. Thus, after pointing out

that the Church seeks to “bind class to class in friendliness and good feeling,” he goes on to claim that “we learn from nature “ what “is also the grand Christian dogma on which religion rests as on its foundation — that when, we have given up this present life, then shall we really begin to live. God has not created us for the perishable and transitory things of earth, but for things heavenly and everlasting.” And on the basis of such knowledge, the goods of earth take on secondary importance: “As for riches and the other things which men call good and desirable,” possession of them in abundance or otherwise is irrelevant compared to their right use.³⁸

On this view, human reason, which according to Hobbes and Madison falls into confusion when it pridefully tries to accomplish more than calculation on the basis of material self-interest, apparently can know with sufficient certainty the existence of non-material goods and the principles of virtue by which they are to be achieved. Thus Leo insists, contrary to Madison, that moral and religious motives are efficacious in quelling social and economic conflict precisely because they correspond to our natural knowledge and desires instead of contradicting them. Put another way, man is by nature not (or at least not simply) an acquisitive being, but a moral and religious being, and his nature, as well as his natural knowledge of his nature, places limits on the extent to which the goods of the earth are to be pursued. Indeed, the existence of such limits is expressly affirmed in the very next paragraph of the encyclical. Temporal blessings generally, Leo suggests, are limited by their usefulness with a view to virtue: whoever has them in abundance has them for the “perfecting of his own nature” and that they might be used “for the benefit of others.”³⁹ In contrast, again, Madison’s anthropology rejects the possibility of such a solution to the problem of faction — suggests in fact that faction cannot be solved but only controlled — because it implicitly denies the possibility that any human being can feel that he has “enough” of material goods.

The Politics of the Madisonian Republic

To lay these two approaches to the problem of faction alongside each other, as we have done, is to invite an attempt to judge between them. Rather, it is almost to demand such an attempt, so insistently do Leo and Madison assert the error of the other’s position. Madison, after all, contends that faction is a fact of human nature with which we must live, even with which we can profitably live, incorporating it into “the necessary and ordinary operations of government.”⁴⁰ In contrast, Leo insists that while “[m]utual agreement” between the classes “results in the beauty of good order,” “perpetual conflict” such as Madison seems to countenance “necessarily produces confusion and savage barbarity.”⁴¹

This formulation of their differences might be viewed as presenting an easy, empirical test by which to judge their respective positions. Leo asserts that there are two alternatives: either we overcome factious conflict through morality and religion, or society degenerates into savage barbarity. Madison, on the other hand, sees a middle ground the existence of which Leo implicitly denies: factious conflict accepted and used as a means of moderating itself through the mutual checking of diverse interests. Does such a middle ground exist? Has American society, erected according to Madisonian principles, in fact declined into barbarism through its tolerance of faction?

In light of this formulation the superiority of Madison's positions appears obvious, for his scheme has worked. He feared that economic conflict would destroy popular government, he sought a solution, the solution was adopted, and popular government in America persists, contrary to all the expectations of the European learned at the time of the Founding. This verdict in Madison's favor, however, is too hasty insofar as it ignores the concerns at the heart of Leo's analysis. Madison's project may be successful on its own terms, but those terms are not Leo's, and in fact he would contend Madison's terms are the wrong ones.

Put another way, what appear to be good results in light of Madison's low expectations appear to be poor results in light of Leo's high expectations. Madison thinks that faction cannot be cured, but Leo thinks it can. Therefore, what Madison takes to be a masterstroke of political diagnosis and prescription — the mere maintenance of popular government with private property intact — Leo would view as a kind of malpractice. After all, what would one think of a doctor who boasts with pride that he keeps his patient from dying when he might in fact have restored him to health?

The more demanding nature of Leo's standards, in light of which Madison's project might be thought less than successful, comes to light in his discussion of the kind of justice that he thinks should exist between the classes. This justice, to be sure, includes the security for property and public peace that Madison hopes to achieve. Thus Leo notes that "the obligations of justice" require, among other things, that workers never "injure the property" of an employer nor "resort to violence in defending their own cause," and that owners must not "defraud any one of wages that are his due."⁴² Yet Leo's justice also includes the following, addressed directly to owners and employers but no doubt obligatory to all: That they "respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character," and that they recall that "to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain" is "truly shameful and inhuman."⁴³

Again, in this light it seems much more plausible to suggest the failure of Madison's project. It is certainly true that America has not degenerated into

confusion, savagery, and barbarity in the sense of open fighting between the classes that shatters the public peace and destroys the regime. But the avoidance of such evils does not fully satisfy the conditions of justice as Leo sees them, which include the observance of a high moral standard in one's dealing with others. It is possible, then, that society may enjoy *public* peace and tranquility, as well as security of property, while still being characterized by a kind of *moral* "confusion and savage barbarity" in which human beings shamefully and inhumanly treat each other — and indeed themselves — merely as instruments of gain.

Once more, this is to suggest that the Madisonian project is a success on its own terms but a failure on Leo's terms. But this again invites the question: whose terms are the right ones? Here we encounter the question whether Leo's account is utopian, whether its sets standards for political life that are unrealistically high. After all, his critique of the Madisonian republic carries weight only if the aspirations in light of which it is made can be realized. Put another way, if Madison as a political physician really is doing all that can be done just by keeping his patient alive, then it is no criticism to blame him for not restoring him to health. Can we, then, expect the classes to treat each other with the kind of justice Leo demands?

Here it is necessary, in fairness, to hold Leo to a standard that is reasonable, and not to portray him as expecting more of this life than he really does. There is evidence in *Rerum Novarum* that Leo does not think that a return to Christian morals will result in society of saints. Hence his qualification that the Church is offering "those teachings whereby the conflict can be brought to an end, or rendered, at least, far less bitter."⁴⁴ The question, then, is whether one can realistically expect to achieve, not a morally perfect social and political life, but one substantially better than that offered by the Madisonian republic.

Addressing this practical question, however, necessarily raises the theoretical question: whose account of human nature is correct? Is man what Madison and Hobbes suggest, a being driven fundamentally by a desire for material gain? If so, the Madisonian republic is no doubt the best one can do politically. Is man fundamentally a moral and religious being, whose deepest yearnings can, when properly addressed, limit his desire for gain? If so, Leo's aspirations need not be dismissed as utopian.

Since we know human nature from observation of human beings, however, the theoretical question cannot be separated from the practical. We are again confronted with a kind of empirical test. Is man susceptible to religion's appeal, as Leo suggests, or not? Here Madison and Leo simply offer divergent assessments of the evidence of experience. Madison suggests that "we well know" the uselessness of religious and moral appeals. To be sure, he does not state his position quite so strongly, opting instead to say that such appeals

merely cannot be “relied on as an adequate control.” Yet in the immediate sequel he adds the following: “They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together.”⁴⁵ Religion and morality, then, are inadequate when it comes to restraining individuals, and are less than inadequate when it comes to restraining groups. But what is “less than inadequate” if not practically useless?

Leo, on the other hand, confidently appeals to history as proof that humans do respond to religion and morality. “Of these facts there cannot be any shadow of doubt: for instance, that civil society was renovated in every part by Christian institutions; that in the strength of that renewal the human race was brought back from death to life, and to so excellent a life that nothing more perfect had been known before, or will come to be known in the ages that have yet to be.”⁴⁶ Though society cannot be perfected in this life, yet a rather lofty standard can be achieved and, Leo suggests, ought to be striven for.

Which account of human nature is the more accurate? Two points can be made in favor of Leo’s over Madison’s. In the first place, we might observe that Leo’s conviction that history demonstrates Christianity’s ability to draw society to a high level of moral rectitude is shared by St. Augustine, perhaps the Christian thinker who can with less plausibility than any other be accused of utopianism.

More seriously, we might observe a kind of incoherence in the Madisonian and Hobbesian account of human nature that renders it theoretically suspect: each paradoxically accords religion sufficient power to cause problems but not enough to solve them.

More specifically, Madison and Hobbes both affirm and deny religion’s ability to move men in opposition to their material interests. Hobbes claims that religious belief is present in the state of nature, but that it is insufficient to quell the state of war that arises from human competition for gain. Thus religion cannot restrain our material appetites. On the other hand, he also suggests that government must regulate religious doctrine, lest men be frightened into rebellion — and into risking death at the hands of the all-powerful sovereign — by fear of spirits invisible. Thus religion apparently can not only restrain but overcome our material appetites. The same contradiction is reproduced in the argument of *Federalist Ten*. There Madison claims that religion is too weak to restrain men from injustice when injustice will serve their economic interests,⁴⁷ on the one hand, and, on the other, that religion is powerful enough to cause factious conflict in opposition to men’s economic interests, that men will ignore “their common good” in order to “vex and oppress” each other on the basis of their “zeal” for their religious opinions.⁴⁸

It strains credulity to think that this apparent contradiction escaped Hobbes and Madison. But if they were aware of it, they would have to admit

the possibility that religion does have a sufficient hold on human nature to offer the chance of creating a more elevated society than that for which they aimed. It strains credulity no less, however, to think that this implication escaped them. One is, then, confronted with the possibility that, aware of such lofty possibilities, they deliberately chose something more mundane.

Why would they do this? Perhaps they did not think the possibility of such a society as Leo envisions was worth the risks it necessarily entails. Considered carefully, the Hobbesian and Madisonian teaching implies a position on religion with which Leo could no doubt agree: that religion is both a source of faction and harmony, that it can lead to a good society but that it can also at least as easily lead to a society torn by the most pitiless conflict. Given these alternatives, they opt instead for the rather low but reliably peaceful social life of unrestrained but creatively channeled material self-interest. The great things, as Socrates says in Plato's *Republic*, carry the risk of a great fall. Hobbes and Madison, fearing the great fall, eschew the great things.

This, no doubt, is the charitable interpretation of their position. They reject pursuit of the harmonious politics of the Christian society, even though they must know that its achievement is possible, not out of a perverse will to choose a worse alternative, but out of an understandable fear of the awful consequences that follow when such a politics fails. Such a position is decent. It is also, however, corrupt insofar as it implicitly elevates the low things above the high, the subhuman above the human. Hobbes and Madison decline to seek the society that would secure both the goods of the body and the goods of the soul because they rightly apprehend that such seeking carries the danger that the goods of the body might be lost. But this is practically to prefer the goods of the body to those of the soul, and this is not an option that Catholicism could endorse.

Notes

1. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, edited by Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), page 57.
2. *Ibid.*, pages 56-57.
3. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), 1 and 3. The references are to paragraph, not page, numbers. The version to which I refer is that found on the Vatican website (see www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/index.htm), the text of which is the same as that found in *The Church Speaks to the Modern World*, edited by Etienne Gilson (Image Books, 1954), pages 205-244.
4. *The Federalist*, page 57.
5. *Rerum Novarum*, 2.

6. *The Federalist*, page 58.
7. *Ibid.*, page 65.
8. *Rerum Novarum*, 17.
9. *Ibid.*, 37.
10. *The Federalist*, page 58.
11. *Ibid.*, page 60 (Madison's emphasis).
12. *Rerum Novarum*, 15.
13. *The Federalist*, page 56.
14. *Rerum Novarum*, 20, 21, and 25.
15. *The Federalist*, page 56.
16. *Rerum Novarum*, 3, 16, and 19.
17. *Ibid.*, 24 and 25.
18. *The Federalist*, page 61.
19. *Ibid.*, 58.
20. *Rerum Novarum*, 62.
21. *The Federalist*, page 5.
22. *Rerum Novarum*, 19.
23. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), page 119-120.
24. *Ibid.*, page 119.
25. *Ibid.*, page 119.
26. *Ibid.*, page 120 (Hobbes's emphasis).
27. *Ibid.*, page 90.
28. *Ibid.*, page 33.
29. *Ibid.*, page 90.
30. *The Federalist*, page 59.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, page 61.
33. *Ibid.*, page 59.
34. *Ibid.*, page 58.
35. *Rerum Novarum*, 17.
36. *Ibid.*, 18.
37. *Ibid.*, 19.
38. *Ibid.*, 21.
39. *Ibid.*, 22.
40. *The Federalist*, page 59.
41. *Rerum Novarum*, 19.
42. *Ibid.*, 20.
43. *Ibid.*, 20.
44. *Ibid.*, 16.
45. *The Federalist*, page 61.
46. *Rerum Novarum*, 27. See also 59.
47. *The Federalist*, page 61.
48. *Ibid.*, page 58.