

ARE THERE CATHOLIC ANTECEDENTS OF
THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
ARCHBISHOP JOHN IRELAND, ORESTES BROWNSON
AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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In the 19th century, Ireland and Brownson are the two best Catholic thinkers from whom one can learn something about whether the principles of the Declaration reflect the teachings of pre-modern Catholic political theologians or the atheistic teachings of modern political philosophers. They disagree, and their disagreement is both thought provoking and instructive. 20th-century Catholic thinkers follow Ireland's understanding that the Declaration reflects teachings of Catholic thinkers, though there are important differences between more moderate and more extreme versions of this argument. The 20th century culminates in the teaching of the philosopher Pope John Paul II, who finds in the Declaration's principles a meaning compatible with Catholic moral teachings. However, no one in the 20th century addresses Brownson's substantial argument to the contrary.

Introduction

My subject is the relation of Catholic political thought and Catholic political ideas to American political principles as embodied specifically in the *Declaration of Independence*. This matters in the first place because the *Declaration* contains the moral principles which ground, which justify, and which explain America's political existence. The *Declaration*, not the Constitution, asserts that "all men are created equal", that all men "are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights" among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and that it is the purpose of all governments everywhere and always "to secure these rights." The *Declaration*, not the Constitution, states that the "just powers" of government have their source in "the

consent of the governed” and that the people are entitled, as a matter of right, both to give and to withdraw that consent. The *Declaration* is explicit that the withdrawal of popular consent may rightly go so far as “to alter or abolish” the form of government whenever it fails to secure these rights and then to replace it with a different government which the people shall judge most likely to secure “their safety and happiness.”

All these self-evident truths¹ are stated and explained in the *Declaration*, both more in number and more emphatically, than in the Constitution. The Constitution does not state that all human beings are made equal by their Creator; the Constitution does not speak of liberties that are, as Thomas Jefferson had written earlier, “the Gift of God.”² The *Declaration*, not the Constitution, gives reasons why “consent of the governed” is the basis of government’s “just powers.” The *Declaration*, not the Constitution, gives a philosophic and moral justification for America’s political existence which justifies the right of the people to form and consent to the government formed afterwards by the Constitution, and then subsequently re-formed 27 more times (and as recently as 1995).

So, in focusing on the relation of Catholic political thought to the *Declaration*, I mean to focus on that document which is the primary source for the teachings, which the founders of America as a nation³ thought made American democracy democratic, rationally intelligible, and morally defensible. But for Catholics as Catholics, it is important to know how the *Declaration*’s truths square, or do not square, with political teachings consistent with that faith. For instruction in the latter principles, I shall use as guides the best American Catholic thinkers that I know who have somewhat different perspectives on this matter.

The History of Catholic Answers to the Question

My topic today is not new. Historically, the title’s question “Are There Catholic Antecedents of the *Declaration of Independence*” has been answered quite differently by two of the most informed and thoughtful American Catholic political thinkers who have focused on the relation between Catholic thought and American regime principles, namely Archbishop John Ireland and Orestes Brownson.⁴

Ireland thought there are Catholic antecedents to the *Declaration*’s principles. And, in taking up this position, he attempted to *persuade* and *reassure* both Catholic and non-Catholic Americans that the historic political teachings of the Church’s ‘Doctors’ shared American democratic political principles, especially as those principles are contained in the *Declaration of Independence*. He argued that these

antecedent Catholic principles justify “government by the people,” that is, democracy as the *Declaration* understands and *justifies* it, and as the Constitution establishes and *embodies* it. Ireland did not go so far as to claim, as some who came after him would do, that Catholic thinkers directly influenced the American Founders. He made the more moderate argument that Catholic political thought justified democracy long before modern or Enlightenment free thinkers like Voltaire, Locke, and Rousseau did so.

Brownson’s take on our question whether the *Declaration* has Catholic antecedents is very different. While he understood, as did Archbishop Ireland, that 16th and 17th century Catholic political thinkers use language that seems identical to the key teachings of the *Declaration*, he believed that the *Declaration*’s principles turn out to be decisively different, are ultimately atheistic, and undermine Catholic teachings.

I will first treat Ireland, who presents the more hopeful or optimistic view.

Archbishop John Ireland

Archbishop Ireland was perhaps the most learned Catholic of the late 19th century who both thought hard and spoke publicly about the relation of Catholicism and America. He regarded the *Declaration*’s statement that “all men are created equal” as derived from the Christian teaching “about the doctrine of the common fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.” Stuningly, he further regarded the *Declaration* as the ‘first manifestation’ of this Christian teaching in “civil and political institutions.”⁵

I characterize this as stunning for the following reason. The usual contemporary scholarly account of the *Declaration*’s equality teaching is that it is derived from 17th and 18th-century secular and rationalist, if not atheistic, political philosophers—Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, etc. And the *Declaration* is usually thought to have been written by Jefferson and others under this latter day influence. Ireland’s alternative account strikes one as a lot of, well, chutzpah. For, if it is true, how does he explain why it took this allegedly Christian inspiration 1800 years to become politically effective? Why for so many centuries did Catholicism support monarchic and aristocratic political institutions, which did not exactly embody, as a political principle, that ‘all men are created equal?’ On the contrary, they embodied the principle that the title to rule was hereditary, thereby creating a fundamentally hierarchical political distinction between the rulers and the ruled. In Jefferson’s

colorful and angry phrase, written in a letter only days before his death on July 4, 1826, “the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”⁶

Ireland’s answer to why it took so long for the Christian teaching that “all men are created equal” to become politically effective is that it took this long because “the Christian church was leavening human society, and patiently awaiting the promised fermentation. This came at last and it came in America.” If Ireland is right, then the ‘all men are created equal’ in the *Declaration* is Christian and Catholic.

However, it did not take quite so long for the *Declaration*’s teaching that governments “derive their just power from the consent of the governed” to arise in Catholic thought.

Ireland cites what looks like a very moderate early justification for “government by consent of the governed” in St. Augustine. He quotes Augustine as saying “. . . it would be advisable to enact that a people should choose its own authorities for the administration of its affairs.” However, if one checks Augustine’s text, this turns out not to be a matter of abstract right but only of prudence, and the conditions which make it prudent are narrowly circumscribed. It applies only “if the people are serious and temperate” and if “they have such concern for the public good that each one would prefer the public interest to his own.”⁷ Of course. This is really only a statement of an essentially Aristotelian idea, namely, that in founding a city one should make the ruling part that part which is the most public-spirited and healthy.

However, Ireland has a stronger case regarding the *Declaration*’s teaching that, as a matter of right, only the consent of the people justifies political authority. This does have antecedents in both Suarez and Bellarmine. Bellarmine says:

Political power resides in the whole community as in a subject, because it is of divine law. Now the divine law has not conferred political power on a particular person. Therefore it has conferred it on the whole community (*multitudo*). Moreover . . . there is no reason why one man rather than another should be ruler, since all men are equal (by the natural law). Therefore political power resides in the whole community.”⁸

Both Suarez and Bellarmine are arguing particularly against the theory that any particular king received his authority from God. The contrary “divine right” teaching seems to have been primarily an

Anglican teaching that appears to have arisen as a consequence of the Reformation. I do not believe that divine right was ever a strongly established teaching among Catholic political thinkers, if indeed it existed at all. Catholic Augustinian and Thomistic thought, prior to the neo-scholastics of the 16th and 17th centuries, was primarily not so much concerned with the origin of political authority as with the justice with which it governed.

At any rate, Ireland argues that the *Declaration*’s “government by consent of the governed” is for Bellarmine and Suarez “the condition upon which heaven conveys [political] authority.”

Ireland further claims Catholic antecedents even for the *Declaration*’s justification for what we have come to call the “right of revolution.” He cites Aquinas to say, “human laws which contradict the divine law have no binding power and ‘are rather outrages than laws’.” Aquinas’s justification for revolution is real but qualified: “tyrannical rule is not just, because it is not for the public good and hence to rise up against it is not properly” sedition unless “its overthrow should cause greater evils.”⁹ We should note, however, that this is at most a negative justification for revolution, i.e. that overthrow of a tyrant is not (necessarily) sedition. It is a long way from the *Declaration*’s proud and robust assertion of the right of the people to decide whether the existing government is securing rights. But Ireland’s argument has stronger support in Suarez.

If a lawful king rules tyrannically, and there is no other way for the kingdom to protect itself except to depose him, it is lawful for the whole community by a solemn act to do so. This action is sanctioned [both] by the law of nature, which always allows it to repel force by force, as well as by the terms of the original contract under which the first king accepted sovereignty from the people.¹⁰

Orestes Brownson

Orestes Brownson, after whom this lecture series is named, wrote *The American Republic* (1865). Brownson says correctly that the church thinkers who discussed the origin and nature of government were “moral theologians.”¹¹ Like Ireland later, he particularly acknowledges Francisco Suarez, S. J. (1548-1617) and Robert Bellarmine, S. J. (1542-1621).¹²

Brownson was well versed in the history of political philosophy as well as the political teachings of the Churches’ moral theologians. And he therefore reads the *Declaration* as containing an idea of the social compact opposed to that of those theologians. In fact, one of the

valuable and not well known things one can learn from Brownson is that there are not one but two social contract traditions which are, one could almost say, entirely different: 1) that of the classical philosopher Cicero and the Catholic theologians and 2) that of modern political philosophers Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

The fundamental difference between these two views is decisive for how Brownson judges the *Declaration* in relation to the tradition of Catholic political thought, i.e. the thought not of official teachings of the Church but of “its doctors.” Let me first sketch this Ciceronian\theologian view as Brownson presents it.

Society is a compact concerning “the mutual relations and reciprocal rights and duties of princes and their subjects.”¹³ But the compact is not, repeat not, the source of the just powers either of society or of government, as the *Declaration* says explicitly it is respecting government. Both society and the powers of government are “imposed by God,” either through divine law (say, Moses?) or through natural law. Society is real, natural, and “organic” in a way that no artificial consent is capable of creating. While society is composed of individuals, it is more than that. He argues by analogy that the human body derives its life from more than the particles of matter it assimilates from its food. Similarly, society derives its life, and government its powers, from more than the individuals which compose them.”¹⁴ Following Cicero, Brownson maintains, “Every man is born in society and remains there.”¹⁵ And this fact imposes on every individual “certain obligations to society, and society certain obligations to him; for under the natural law, every one has certain rights, as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and owes certain duties to society for the protection and assistance it affords him.”¹⁶ Notice that while rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” sound like the *Declaration*, what the *Declaration* omits is acknowledgment of any natural duties. That is, for Brownson, one indicator that the *Declaration*’s teaching is not consistent with a Catholic teaching.

In a similar way, Brownson understands the Ciceronian\Catholic theologian view, as that government as such does not originate in an agreement either between the people and their rulers or between several individuals to form a community. God imposes it, it is of divine origin, and its just powers come from God.

Let me now sketch Brownson’s understanding of the quite different social contract view of “modern political theorists” which he maintains is also that of the *Declaration*. According to Brownson, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have given new content to the old Christian idea of “social contract.” He regards this new content as having

“abused the phrase borrowed from the theologians and made it cover a political doctrine which they would have been the last to accept.” The materialist philosopher Hobbes originated this tradition and “imagined a state of nature antecedently to civil society in which men lived without government, law, or manners, out of which they finally come by entering into a voluntary agreement [either] with some one of their number to be king and to govern them, or with one another to submit to the rule of the majority.” Brownson thinks that Locke and Rousseau follow Hobbes, though Locke and Rousseau have more regard to the liberty of the people than to the power of government.¹⁷

Most relevantly for us, Brownson thinks Jefferson’s *Declaration* follows this modern view that “civil society, the state, the government originates in this compact” and that the American government “derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.”¹⁸ Contrary to the Ciceronian\Catholic theological tradition, neither society nor government are natural but rather wholly artificial. They are both created by the consent of individuals, and so individuals may “uncreate it whenever they judge it advisable.”¹⁹ Individuals are neither morally required to remain in it or even to obey the law made by consent of the majority. Society has no rights which individuals are morally obligated to respect “except such as it derives from individuals who all have equal rights.” But this supposition has a terrible consequence. It makes majority rule valid only if “adopted by unanimous consent.” In other words, it makes majority rule impossible and not morally binding on individuals for all practical purposes. By undermining the moral basis of law abidingness, it sows lawlessness into the very principles of governing.²⁰

Brownson connects this flaw (which he regards as fatal) to the modern theorist’s rejection of the “the divine origin and ground of civil authority”, i.e. of the just powers of government. To grasp what he has in mind here, we need to remember that the *Declaration* says the origin and ground of the just powers of government is the consent of the people. But by denying that the powers of the government are ordained by God, this view “deprives the state of her sacredness . . . and hold on conscience.” It consecrates not civil authority but “the right of insurrection [revolution].” This is why “the [modern democratic] age sympathizes not with authority in its efforts to sustain itself and protect society, but with those who conspire against it, the insurgents, rebels, revolutionists seeking its destruction. The established government that seeks to enforce respect for its legitimate authority and compel obedience to the law, is held to be despotic, tyrannical, oppressive . . .” As a result, the governments “now in the civilized world” are “the logical

or necessary result of the attempt to erect the state on atheistical principles . . . for political atheism . . . can sustain itself only by force since it recognizes no right but might.” No modern government “can sustain itself for a moment without an armed force sufficient to overawe or crush the party or parties in permanent conspiracies against it.”²¹

Brownson thinks that the right of the majority to rule has a better prudential basis in the view of the Catholic moral theologians that “society has rights not derived from individuals, and which are entrusted to its government.” This permits the majority to be “the best representative practicable of society itself.”²²

We have now seen that the two most thoughtful 19th-century Catholic thinkers have quite opposite views of the relation of the tradition of Catholic political thought to the *Declaration*. Ireland sees Catholic roots of the *Declaration*. Brownson thinks the *Declaration*’s principles are the language of Christian theologians given a new content by the atheistical principles of modern political theorists, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. I will leave it at that for you to ponder about which view is closer to the truth.

The 20th Century

We have seen now how the question this lecture asks, “Are there Catholic antecedents of the *Declaration*’s principles” has been answered both “yes” and a qualified, but I think decisive, “no” by those whom I described as two of the most thoughtful Catholic thinkers on these matters whose thought I know.

Twentieth-century Catholic thinkers have followed Ireland’s view more than Brownson’s. The early 20th century even went beyond Ireland’s account by claiming that Catholic political thought influenced Jefferson in the writing of the *Declaration*. This claim seems to have first appeared in a 1917 article by Galliard Hunt in the *Catholic Historical Review* which claimed that “Thomas Jefferson derived from Bellarmine substantially the wording in which he stated these famous doctrines” of the *Declaration*.²³ The most thorough going and best documented such claim is a book published in 1926 by Rev. Fr. John Clement Rager, *The Political Philosophy of St. Robert Bellarmine*.²⁴ A version of Hunt and Rager’s claims were popularized by a Catholic college textbook by Fr. John A. Ryan and Fr. Moorhouse F. X. Millar, S. J., which was widely used in the first half of the 20th century.²⁵ While their claim is more moderate than that of Hunt and Rager, the effect and intention of all three was to persuade Catholics and non-Catholics alike that Catholics belonged in, and could be good citizens of, American

democracy, because that democracy was either based upon or at least overlapped with the ancient political teaching of Catholic moral theologians.

I believe the claim of Catholic influence is overstated, even greatly overstated. Hunt’s claim that Jefferson, in drafting the *Declaration*, derived from Bellarmine “substantially the wording” of key *Declaration* formulations, is far less demonstrable than that Jefferson lifted two passages from the dissenting Protestant or free thinker John Locke’s 17th-century “Two Treatises of Civil Government.” In contrast, notwithstanding some very similar wording that Bellarmine’s thought shares with both the *Declaration* and with Locke, it cannot even be shown from direct evidence that Jefferson ever read Bellarmine. The most that can be shown is that Jefferson read Locke who read Robert Filmer, an Anglican defender of divine right Monarchy; that Filmer quotes Bellarmine and that therefore Locke would have known about Bellarmine.

This claim of Catholic influence on the Founders thus, in my opinion, goes too far. Yet the fact that scholars could make this claim needs to be understood. Francis Oakley ascribes it (charitably I would say) to a kind of “confessional effusion.”²⁶ I take that to mean a desire that goes beyond the evidence out of an exuberant wish that it be so in order to reassure especially American Catholics that they can be both Catholics and democrats.

There are three groups to which such reassurance was directed. First, American Catholics needed reassurance that they had a place in American democracy because of continuing claims from some Protestant Americans that Catholicism had an undemocratic church structure and an undemocratic notion of the relation of individual believers to the Church, on the one hand, and to God on the other. The most famous response to these charges by a Catholic public intellectual was Fr. John Courtney Murray’s book, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Propositions* (1960). It substantially restated the Ireland view that the *Declaration*’s thought was Catholic before it was modern. Notably, Murray omitted supporting his argument, as Ireland had done, with citations and quotations from Suarez and Bellarmine. His book was, in that way, more assertion and plausible argument than demonstration.

Murray’s book came at a time in our history when the relationship of Catholicism and America democracy was being discussed both passionately and publicly. For 1960, the year Murray’s book appeared, was the same year that John Kennedy, the Democratic Party’s nominee for President, was publicly challenged by mainstream

Protestant leaders like Rev. Billy Graham and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale to show that his Catholicism did not make him unfit to be President.

Nor has this suspicion of Catholics holding high office disappeared. As recently as 1991, the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court elicited overt and plain anti-Catholic suspicion and animus from prominent, nationally syndicated columnists, cartoonists, and even the then Governor of Virginia. Allegiance to the Pope and membership in a Church that had a non-Protestant view of the relation of the individual believer to church authority, were explicit grounds for this suspicion and animus.²⁷

The second group of 20th-century Americans who needed reassurance about the compatibility of Catholicism and American democracy were some non-Catholic Americans. Both Ireland and Murray understood the rationally plausible (and not merely bigoted) concern that Protestant Americans had about Catholics and democracy. And they directed their argument accordingly. Historians taught correctly that modern democracy arose in Protestant countries, whereas, since Constantine, Catholicism had been allied with monarchy; that freedom of conscience as a matter of right existed before America only in Protestant Holland and the Netherlands, and, somewhat less liberally, in Protestant England. In contrast, Catholic countries permitted non-Catholic rights based freedom of conscience only as a result of it being wrung from them by the influence of the French Revolution. Moreover, as late as the 1920s, Popes continued to write Encyclicals arguing that the state should underwrite the Catholic Church and faith.

American Protestants also distrusted Catholicism as undemocratic because of the difference between Protestant and Catholic ideas of the relation of the individual, God, and the Church. American Protestantism was fundamentally dissenting Protestantism. Tocqueville stresses the importance of the fact that American democracy from its early 17th-century beginnings was Puritan. And Puritanism, he argues, was 'as much a political theory as a religion.' Moreover, increasingly as time went on, the original Puritanism was augmented by Baptists, Congregationals, Presbyterians, Reformed Quakers, Dunkers, Amish, and Mennonites, far more than it was by Anglicans or Lutherans. And this augmentation was all from the dissenting wing of the Reformation. The consequence of this for American political culture was stressed by Burke in his 1775 *Speech on Conciliation with America* where he describes the Americans as "the Protestants of the Protestant religion."

All Protestantism emphasizes the individual's relationship with, and personal responsibility before God, and de-emphasizes the idea of 'Church' as mediating that relationship and responsibility. But

dissenting Protestantism tends to reject any lingering Catholic notion that the Church may authoritatively instruct the individual conscience by authoritatively interpreting God's law for that individual. That the Catholic Church asserts this authority sticks in the craw of dissenting Protestantism to such an extent that it regards the Catholic Church as the enemy of democracy. The connection between this theological disagreement and the dissenting Protestant fear that Catholicism works against political democracy is this. For dissenting Protestantism no church authority may presume to authoritatively instruct the conscience of church members. In addition, church structure is based on consent of the governed. A church is simply a group of believers who gather together to worship God as they believe is best. That structure reinforces the idea of a political order in which government is by the consent of the governed. Church structure is the same as the political structure. But Catholicism's church structure is not democratic in this way. So it is not difficult to see why Catholics would appear, from a dissenting Protestant perspective, to be hostile to political democracy.

Conclusion

The 20th-century claim that the language of Bellarmine is reflected in the *Declaration* suggests a link between Catholic thought and American democracy that is too strong and unqualified, and a compatibility between them that goes too far. It is both historically dubious and may be as dangerous to Catholicism's self-understanding as was the 20th-century Protestant suspicion and animus that it accompanied. Brownson's view should be taken seriously: that while the *Declaration's* principles may verbally resemble the teachings of Catholic doctors, beneath that appearance its principles are substantively the thought of 'modern political theorists;' and that this thought is atheistic because it removes the divine ground of the just powers of government by replacing God with the people as the source of those powers. Thoughtful Catholics need to be moderate in asserting the extent to which the *Declaration* is compatible with their faith.²⁸

On the other hand, it is true that the philosopher, Pope John Paul II, recently publicly praised 'the founding documents of the United States' for asserting A certain 'self-evident' truths about the human person: truths which could be discerned in human nature, built into it by 'nature's God'.²⁹ The Holy Father does not understand these truths' assertion of "equality of rights" in the individualist way Brownson rightly attributes to "modern political theorists." For the latter understanding of rights undermines the common good, majority rule, and law-abidingness.

The disagreement between them appears to be this: Brownson stresses and thinks decisive the fact that the *Declaration* seems to deny the divine basis of government's "just powers," whereas the Holy Father stresses and thinks decisive the *Declaration's* acknowledgment of the divine grounds of man's rights.

Both contribute an insight which thoughtful Catholics can profitably ponder. Brownson is surely onto something in seeing that rights as understood by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau provide no basis for actions born of Christianity's self-sacrificing love. But the Holy Father is also onto something in seeing that the *Declaration's* rights teaching can be understood in a traditional Catholic way, namely, as rights belonging to human beings who are fully embedded in society, and not as individuals whose natural condition is an individualism disconnected from natural ties to family and community and existing prior to, and independent of, society. Understood in light of the brotherhood of man, under the Fatherhood of God, and based on that Father's command that His children have a duty to love their neighbor as themselves, the *Declaration's* principles are, to the Holy Father, a claim of the right to "opportunities in the pursuit of happiness and in service to the common good;" to a "freedom designed to enable people to fulfill their duties and responsibilities toward the family;" and to a "respect and support for the natural groupings through which people exist, develop, and seek the higher purposes of life in concert with others."²¹ Rights so understood are for the sake of man's moral duties as a member of society. They are not claims to an autonomous existence originating in man as belonging by nature to a pre-social "state of nature."

Finally, between Brownson and the Holy Father, the following seems to be suggested to us about the *Declaration*.

1. That "all men are created equal" can be understood as consistent with Catholic teaching if it is taken to mean that no one has either a natural or divine right to political rule without the consent of the governed. But it is not consistent with Catholic teaching if it is taken to mean that men exist by nature in a pre-political "state of nature" in which there is no just rule or authority or any kind. This idea denies the naturalness, and hence the providentialness, of the family and society. It means that God left man alone by nature. But even after the Fall (the closest approximation Biblical religion has to the idea of a state of nature) man was not alone.

"All men are created equal" also is not consistent with Catholic teaching if, as Brownson correctly says Hobbes means, that "in a state of nature antecedently to civil society . . . all were equal, and every one had a right to every thing, and to take any thing on which he could lay

his hands and was strong enough to hold."²⁵ This cannot be accepted by Catholics for whom all cannot have an equal right to every thing. By nature there is a distinction between mine and thine and it is contrary to our social nature for me to claim as mine what is by nature thine. To assert that all are created equal in this Hobbesian sense both denies our natural sociality and undermines it.

2. The *Declaration's* teaching that government "derives" its just powers from consent of the governed seems inconsistent with Catholic teaching because it denies government's divine origin and therewith God's providence. Catholic thought must affirm that government's just powers come from God.

However, it seems consistent with Catholic teaching that the people as a community have a right to judge whether government is ruling justly. For how else can they have right to judge that an apparent law is unjust and therefore not a law at all but rather an "outrage" and therefore is not morally binding? But this must be a decision of the community, not of individuals. If one construed the *Declaration's* meaning of governments "deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" in that way, it might be just barely possible for Catholics to accept the *Declaration*.

In a time when it is costly to publicly affirm the *Declaration's* assertion that our rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are God-given (what got Clarence Thomas in trouble), the assertion that government's just powers are derived from God is even less acceptable outside the circles illumined by the light of Revelation. So in thus finding a possible way around what Brownson saw as the *Declaration's* atheist root, we are doing no more than reminding ourselves of how we would have to understand our nation's founding premises so that they are consistent with our tradition. We should be under no illusion that this is how Americans generally would understand it.

Still, that is not nothing. If Catholics can be loyal to the principles which justify our nation, even if this requires understanding some of them in ways not shared by other Americans, that is not so bad. For it seems to follow Paul's advice to the Philippians who had apparently asked him how they should treat the things of their Greek culture? He instructed them that "whatsoever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, of good report," and wherever they find "virtue" and "praise," that they should "think on these things." In finding these things in the *Declaration*, albeit understood in a certain manner, Catholics can stand with Paul and the Holy Father. That is not such bad company.

Professor Geoffrey Vaughan of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has questioned the futility of what he takes to be my searching “for a Catholic or Christian politics.” He counters that “the great virtue of Christianity, when compared on mere practical grounds against other religions, is that it does not necessarily get caught-up in politics.” He cites Christ’s words to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” and to the Pharisees, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.” “The real question,” Vaughan suggests, is “the individual Christian’s response to whatever polity he finds himself in.”

One could make his objection stronger by noting that it is striking how little there is in the New Testament that speaks directly to politics beyond the passages Vaughan mentions plus Romans 13 and related texts in which Paul and Peter enjoin obedience to rulers.

My response is that this paper is not a search for a Christian politics. When Vaughan says Christianity is not *necessarily* political, I take that to mean that it does not seek political power, either primarily or essentially, although it may do so accidentally or derivatively. Instead of being an essentially political religion, it is essentially an otherworldly religion. Yet it has implications for this world, and politics is part of this world as we know it. I seek to understand those implications and how they either resemble or differ from political understandings that derive from understandings knowable by merely human reason, especially those understandings which seem either implicitly or explicitly atheistic and which rely on merely human means to secure our living together politically. I understand the political teachings of Hobbes and Rousseau certainly, and Locke probably, to be of this latter description, notwithstanding especially the efforts of Hobbes and Locke to retain a patina of Christian language in an effort to deceive, if possible, even the elect. The purpose of this presentation is to think through this matter, using the most informed and reliable thinkers as guides, in order to avoid being so deceived. To do that one need not know in any detail what a Christian political philosophy writ large must look like. It is enough to be aware when American regime principles are laid in foundation that are inconsistent with ones religious convictions.

Christianity is not a political theory and whether any political theory is fully compatible with it is more than I would claim to know. But the teachings of St. Robert Bellarmine and Suarez, seem, in the respects above indicated, to be more compatible with it than is that of the modern political philosophers whose thought influenced our *Declaration of Independence*.

Notes

1. This is how they are described in the *Declaration*. “We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .”
2. Notes on *Virginia* (1784). The context is an explanation how slavery, by implying that some have the right to take away others God-given liberties, undermines the conviction of that God-giveness in the minds of the people.
3. This formulation of what the founders did is Lincoln’s at Gettysburg. “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation . . .” America and Americans existed, after a manner, prior to the Declaration. However, if Lincoln is correct, the nation we now are begins with that document.
4. Your own Professor Krason has written that Brownson, in the 19th century, and John Courtney Murray, in the 20th, are “the only two Catholics in American history that one might be prompted to categorize as genuine ‘political philosophers.’” Quoted by Peter Augustine Lawler in “Introduction” to *Orestes A. Brownson, The American Republic* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2002), xcii. Reprint of the edition published by P. O’Shea, New York, 1865. The quote references Donald J. Elia and Stephen Krason eds., *We Hold These Truths and More: Further Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993), vii.
5. Archbishop John Ireland, “Patriotism” a speech given before the New York Commandery of the Loyal Legion of Civil War Veterans, April 4, 1894, in *The Church and Modern Society: Lectures and Addresses*, 2 vols. (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press, 1905), p. 165.
6. Thomas Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826.
7. Ireland, “The Catholic Church and Civil Society” a discourse delivered in the Cathedral of Baltimore, November 10, 1884 in *The Church and Modern Society* op. cit. (1905), Vol. 1, p. 63. He cites Augustine’s, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Book I, Ch. 14. The full title is *De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis (Concerning the Free Judgment [or Choice] of the Will)*. Whether *arbitrio* should be translated here as judgment or choice is a relevant ambiguity. On the one hand, it means “judgment” implying deliberation almost in the sense of a judge’s decision, i.e.

something more rational or rule guided than “choice” in the sense of sheer, arbitrary or merely subjective preference. If Augustine had wished to suggest the latter, it would have been more precise to have used something like *delectus*, *optio*, or *sponte*. On the other hand, *arbitrio* also means “choice” so *libero arbitrio* can mean “free choice.” If Augustine meant to convey “choice” without the implication of a rational element or a rule, it would have been more precise to use something like *insolens* instead of *arbitrio*. This ambiguity in *arbitrio* is precisely reflected in its two English derivatives, “arbitrate” and “arbitrary.”

8. Bellarmine, *De Laicis*, Book III, Ch. 6. Bellarmine cites Suarez to a similar effect, *Against the Errors of the Anglican Sect*, Book III, Ch. 2.

9. Ireland, “The Catholic Church and Civil Society” a discourse delivered in the Cathedral of Baltimore, November 10, 1884, in Ireland (1905), op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 48. Note 1.

10. Ireland, Vol.1, p. 48 note 1. Citing Suarez “De Juramento Fidelitatis Regis Anglias,” Ch. 5.

11. Brownson, *The American Republic* (2002), p. 31.

12. Brownson, p. 66.

13. Brownson, pp. 31-32.

14. Brownson, pp. 44-45.

15. Brownson, pp. 32, 50.

16. Brownson, p. 32.

17. Brownson, pp. 32-33.

18. Brownson, p. 33.

19. Brownson, p. 34.

20. Brownson, pp. 42-43.

21. Brownson, pp. 80-81.

22. Brownson, p. 42.

23. To evaluate Hunt’s claim about Jefferson’s lifting language from Bellarmine see Hunt’s paper in *The Catholic Historical Review*, October 1917, p. 289. The claim is not more than an assertion. Hunt was chief of the division of manuscripts in the *Library of Congress* (1909-1917), editor of *The Writings of James Madison*, 9 vol. (1900-10), and of *The Journal of the Debates in the Convention Which Framed the Constitution of the United States*, May-September 1787, As Recorded by James Madison, 2 vol. (1908).

24. Rev. Fr. John Clement Rager, *The Political Philosophy of St. Robert Bellarmine: An Examination of Saint Cardinal Bellarmine’s Defense of Popular Government and the Influence of His Political Theory upon the Declaration of Independence* (Apostolate of Our Lady of Siluva: Spokane, 1995). Reprint of the 1926 edition

25. *The State and the Church* (New York: MacMillan), 1922.

26. Francis Oakley, “Legitimation By Consent: The Question of the Medieval Roots” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 14 (1983), pp. 303-305.

27. See Virginia Governor Wilder’s objection, lightly camouflaged as a question, “how much allegiance is there to the pope” in the *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1991, Sec. 1, p. 17. A few days earlier, syndicated Columnist Ellen Goodman connected Thomas’ “apparent belief in the primacy of so-called natural law” to his Catholic religious education, a point reinforced by Michael Kinsley in *The New Republic* August 5, 1991, p. 4. Laurence Tribe objected to Thomas’ appeal to the *Declaration of Independence’s* view that rights are God-given, connected it to Thomas’s speaking favorably of the argument that the Constitution could not therefore be neutral on abortion, and characterized this as an “extraordinary theological argument,” apparently beyond the pale of legitimate constitutional deliberation. *New York Times* July 15, 1991. A MacNelly cartoon appearing in the *Chicago Tribune* July 5, 1991 is instructive. The first frame has three specifically identifiable professorial and civil rights activists agreeing that Thurgood Marshall’s seat should be filled by an Afro-American, or an Hispanic or other minority but definitely someone who will defend the gains that we have made in civil rights, “gains that have made us more tolerant as a nation...” The second frame has them looking aghast at a newspaper headline and exclaiming in unison, “Good God a Catholic!!”

28. This moderation receives support from Tocqueville whose still authoritative commentary, written by a self-proclaimed “practicing Catholic” and full of much admiration for American democracy, does not mention the Declaration. J. P. May, ed., *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 295.

29. “Address delivered by Pope John Paul II” welcoming Lindy Boggs, the new United States Ambassador to the Holy See, December 16, 1997. It may be found at <http://www.ewnews.com/news/viewrec.cfm?RefNum'6518>