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The Question of Modernity in the Political Thought of Heinrich Rommen

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Introduction

For every thoughtful student of Catholic political theory, modernity must remain a problem, a question. Given its close association with the history and traditions of the pre-modern world, the Church has never had an easy or uncomplicated relation with the political ideas and movements of the modern era. And insofar as most of the intellectual architects of the modern horizon established their teaching in response (if not in direct opposition) to the theological and philosophical positions embodied in orthodox Christianity, it seems an essential task for the Catholic theorist to attempt, in some manner or form, to come to terms with their claims.

The German political thinker, Professor Heinrich A. Rommen, is no exception to this rule. In his magisterial study, *The State in Catholic Thought*, he presents an exhaustive account of the Catholic tradition in political and social philosophy. Though he does not ignore the history of modern practice, he is more interested in examining the response of Catholic thought to modern political philosophy and its intellectual challenges. Along with other theorists in the mid-century Neo-scholastic revival, he would maintain that the orthodox Christian teaching provides a helpful corrective to possible excesses in modern theory partly because it places or locates “politics” within a certain designated sphere. But what are the grounds of his criticism of modernity? What does he consider to be the characteristic excesses or abuses in modern political philosophy? And what remedy, in his estimation, can Catholic political thought offer to cure the ills of modernity?

In responding to a criticism in *The State in Catholic Thought*, Rommen refers to an idea that helps answer these questions. Critics have often accused the Catholic political-philosophical tradition of being a “*complexio oppositorum*,” a confused jumble, as Rommen calls it, of “contradictory borrowings from different

philosophical and theological schools.”¹ To the more acute observer, he suggests, there is rather a “complete unity in these principles”; what appears at first sight to be “diametrically contradictory opinions” are merely “parallel courses of reasoning on account of oscillations” that reside or “rest in the polar unity of the general principles.” He immediately frames these comments within an historical context: in the Catholic intellectual tradition, there occur variations on central theoretical points that represent opposing poles. The account of human nature, for example, can be dominated by a philosophical anthropology that stresses intellect or one that stresses will. Historically, the Thomist tradition has emphasized the pole of intellect, promoting “a strong rationality,” which, however instrumental in the development of natural law, “can lead to an undervaluation of the dynamism of history.” At the other pole, the nominalist school of the *via moderna* promoted the “superiority of the will” to such a degree that, though it restored “the dynamism of historical evolution,” it unfortunately “disparaged the importance and range of natural reason.”² The imbalance toward volition would finally degenerate into a crude Occamism that produced “nihilism in natural ethics, a transformation of the *fides rationalis* into an emotional faith of sentiment, the negation of natural theology and a one-sided supernaturalism.”³ Theoretical and practical difficulties arise only when the tradition, focusing on one aspect or part of the problem, ignores the other side. Rommen cites a second historical example, one with clear political overtones: the dispute between Thomists and Molinists on the question of grace reflects the “tension between the individual and the community.” The Molinists represent the “more individualist school that stresses freedom and self-initiative,” the Thomists prefer “*ordo* and authority.” These intellectual tendencies, polar contrasts, Rommen maintains, define the tradition and “are admissible as long as the accentuation of the one element does not result in the disappearance of the other.” They “may be conditioned by historical circumstances,” but they are more often “typical of the differences about the philosophic premises that result from theological and philosophical schools within the Church.”⁴ Whatever their source, such “internal disputes,” “do not destroy the unity of polar tension.” The Catholic tradition, especially in political theory, lives and breathes between the polar accentuations, trying to unite apparent contradictions. Now though it is never systematically developed in his work, I contend that the idea of a “polar unity of tension” is central to understanding Rommen’s treatment of modernity, his judgment of his fellow Catholic theorists, and his appraisal of the uniqueness of the Catholic political-philosophical tradition.

¹ Heinrich Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought* (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder, 1945), p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Linear and Spheric Thinking

Let us begin with his examination of modernity. In a revealing comment early in *The State in Catholic Thought*, Rommen connects the idea of polar unity with two characteristic ways of political thinking:

What may be called linear thinking goes straight out from one pole or from one idea of the cosmos of ideas, which every true philosophy is. This idea, cut off from its interrelations and interdependencies with the cosmos, [linear thinking] then fanatically thinks to a finish. Then it becomes radical individualism or socialism or totalitarianism or anarchism. This linear thinking, so characteristic of the modern mind and its countless -isms, is a stranger to Catholic political philosophy. For Catholic political philosophy is spheric thinking.⁵

The distinction between linear and spheric thinking provides Rommen with a useful image. The logic of modernity is the logic of linear thinking; this kind of theorizing is a trait so “characteristic of modernity” that at one point Rommen suggests that “an interesting history of modern political philosophy” could be written as a “philosophy of separations, of antinomies.”⁶ What is central to linear thinking is its “monistic opposition of necessary human elements.” At its core, it is exclusive: it “exaggerates” or exalts one pole by forgetting or neglecting the other side. Perhaps the best illustration is the prototypical modern antithesis “individual versus state” that has its political counterparts in the modern trends of liberal individualism and social collectivism. Inasmuch as liberal individualism emphasizes the autonomy of the individual, it rejects the classical Christian understanding of the common good. Because all political and moral duties serve the self-interest of the individual, because in fact “individuals are the only reality,” the state in liberal thought possesses a “service value,” and the common good as such cannot be an “objective and qualitatively different reality.”⁷ Moreover, since it claims the individual is “inherently self-sufficient,” liberal individualism restricts the state to “merely a legislative order” without “moral character,” and without a specifically “moral end.”⁸ The maximization of the individual demands the “minimizing of the state.”⁹ Not surprisingly, most liberal theorists look forward to the eventual disappearance of the state; their fervent hope resides in their belief “in the final overcoming of any form of society that demands any kind of sacrifice of (the) individual’s subjective interests and any restrictions on his liberty.”¹⁰

At the other extreme, “social collectivism” forgets or denies the individual to such a degree that, in embracing the idea of the collective, it allows the individual to disappear “completely submerged in society or state.” The maximization of the

⁵ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

⁶ Ibid., p. 283.

⁷ Ibid., p. 315.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 315, 331.

⁹ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 315.

state demands the minimizing of the individual: "the individual is nothing; the party, the proletariat, the nation is all." Social collectivism, identified at times with the "Hegelian ideal," makes of the state a "moral absolute, the divine representation of absolute morality itself."¹¹ Curiously, adherents of this pole manifest the "same Messianic complex" as liberal theorists; they too embrace the dreams of a "paradisiac millenium of freedom," where the "state will wither away." And seen at least from this secular eschatological perspective, collectivism appears "only socialistic as a means"; it seems as "utterly individualist" as its polar opposite. When collectivism envisions the "final society" as "an amorphous multitude of socialized individuals, classless and egalitarian," and liberalism speaks of its economic utopia as "an atomistic aggregation of individuals formally equal," the extremes touch one another.¹² In both cases, the final vision is thoroughly "non-political."

Often, the antinomies of modernity vary in Rommen's analysis, but they always involve a narrowing of vision. At one point, he contrasts liberal individualism with political romanticism by focusing on the "one-sided exaggeration" in the antinomy of nature and will. Impressed by the "silently working powers of history," the political romantics of the nineteenth century developed a teaching that ignored the place of "human rational will." For them, enlightened self-interest could never provide the standard for political legitimacy; rather "tradition, history and duration" remain "the sufficient and best tests." But their reliance on tradition, and their unfortunate neglect of rationality in response to the exaggerated rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers, too often led them to "embrace authoritarian ideas." On the other hand, in championing the will, liberal theorists ignored or even suppressed "nature, the urge of nature and nature as the final cause of the social process." The "free and rational production of human will" developed in liberal theory arrogates to itself "all forms of socio-political life." Natural law in such a view is emptied of content, transformed into "a set of subjective individual rights wholly abstracted from the socio-political order." As such, by the eighteenth century it becomes an ideological instrument for "perpetual revolution."¹³

But the characteristic reductionism of linear thinking is not defined merely by the pursuit of one extreme and the neglect of another. Rommen finds the modern position "abstract and unreal" largely because it sees in the "polemic antithesis of individual versus state" the "total political problem."¹⁴ In doing so, it sees only the individual and the state and omits important "intermediary" communities, associations that are undoubtedly part of the political landscape and thus part of the "total political problem." By ignoring the rich matrix of political reality and human action, linear modernity fails to see "the family, the free, religious, neighborhood, professional and vocational groups, the free educational and cultural

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 316, 300.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

organizations.” If political theorizing is analogous to a kind of vision, one could say that linear thinking suffers from ideological myopia; it lacks peripheral vision. The modern schema thus “contains dangerous dissolving tendencies.” For example, liberal individualism measures every political category against its “service value to the profit interest of the individual.” But there are no “abstract individuals” in any political community. The liberal individual *qua individual* has no face, bears no flesh; in the end, the human person is “always a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a farmer or a townsman.”¹⁵ Marriage becomes in this moral horizon “a sale contract” serving the “subjective pleasure and will” of the partners; the family becomes the equivalent of a joint stock company.¹⁶ But at the other pole, the view is equally myopic: inasmuch as it ensures “the complete surrender of the individual person,” collectivism erases the family and intermediary associations just as completely as its opposite. And the “socialized individual of the classless society” is as faceless an abstraction as the “free and absolutely autonomous individual” of liberalism. In eliminating any social form that lies outside of its chosen antithesis, both sides so closely resemble each other that they merge into one. In light of these remarks, one is not surprised to find Rommen associating linear modernity with all types of “perfectionism and progressivism” in political life. By cutting itself off from the “cosmos of ideas,” linear thinking divorces itself from the complexity of political reality; it cannot comprehend the “total political problem.” And, as a result, all difficulties are easily dissolved: progress towards the perfect society is assured when traveling in a straight line.¹⁷

Spheric thinking, emblematic of Catholic political thought, is altogether different: it “rests on the existential way of thinking”; it is “discursive and dialectical.”¹⁸ By its very nature, it is inclusive; in demanding that two poles be thought together, it rejects wholeheartedly any “monistic opposition of necessary human elements.” Unlike the linear extremes of modernity, it does not see political reality as a set of artificially constructed abstract “antitheses”: it does not posit “freedom or order, freedom or authority, the rights of the individual or the rights of the state,” but joins together “freedom in order, the rights of the individual

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹⁷ Rommen does not restrict this analysis to the political realm. He argues that the linear extremes of modernity apply to the epistemological problem as well. Occam’s denial of the “validity of the universal concept” led initially to the “disappearance of the ontological order” and the “denial of natural law” in late scholasticism, and eventually to the complete separation of the ontological and moral orders in modern thought. Underlying this nominalist view, however, is another polar extreme. The nominalists lacked “confidence in the human intellect”; they replaced the natural law with a kind of “moral supernaturalism” grounded solely upon Scripture. (*Ibid.*, p. 176.) Occamism, for Rommen, is the necessary first step in an epistemological slide down hill in modern thought: if the world is “not accessible to the human mind,” it remains a “chaos of phenomena, but *sine fundamentam in re*.” “Human nature as *causa finalis* and *exemplaris*” becomes “man as an empirical entity in its factuality.” The intellect, now separated from any grounding in objective reality, considers itself “as a sovereign versus the world,” a relation that reaches its speculative apotheosis in the Kantian analysis of “the thinking subject that produces its world in autonomy as the object of possible experience in space and time.” And it is the will that inevitably dominates in this horizon, “producing and even finally creating ... moral rules”; the idea of the “free and autonomous” individual, who “creates for himself a subjective order of ends,” is a concept that arises from the polar extreme of late nominalism. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

corresponding to the duties of the state and the rights of the state corresponding to the duties of the individual.”¹⁹ In his chapter on the origin of the state, Rommen provides a cogent example of spheric thinking. The two modern claims concerning this question exhibit typically polar positions. One theoretical tendency, biologicism or organicism, proceeds from “a purely biological concept of human nature,” and dismisses the efficacy of “reason and free will.” Though there are a number of variations, all forms of biologicism trace the beginning of the political community to “the blind forces of biological life,” to “irresistible natural forces.”²⁰ The alternative theory adopts the other extreme, ignoring human nature as “*bios*,” and stressing the complete autonomy of free will. This position, of course, informs the view of various social contract theories. In its especially radical form, which finds its fullest expression in the political thought of Hobbes, social contract theory denies any ground to nature at all—at least with respect to the formation of the political community. It is radically “individualist, utilitarian, and anti-historical.”²¹ As a creature of abstract modernity, it possesses an “entirely political” and “unphilosophic character.”²²

It is only in the light of these extremes that Rommen can illustrate the traditional Catholic position on the origin of the political community. While maintaining that the state “arises with moral necessity out of (the) dynamic teleological growth of human nature,” the tradition also claims that the “concrete coming into existence” of the political order is the result of human initiative and will.²³ The tradition binds together the elements that the linear extremes of social contract and biological theory “exaggerate or forget”; it does not separate “*bios*” from “*logos*” or nature from will, but considers them together “in interaction.” “The state is thus the result of a driving power of man’s biological life and of the free rational activity of man recognizing his nature’s realization as the ideal of his moral existence.”²⁴ To set the natural over the intentional order, or to assert the intentional over the natural order, is to lose, as Rommen suggests in a felicitous phrase, “the fruitful polar tension of natural urge and freedom.”²⁵

This analysis, however, does not go as far as it should. Rommen has indicated that linear thinking fixes on one “polemic antithesis” mistaking it for the “total political problem.” Spheric thinking cannot be reduced or confined to the mere union in tension of antinomies. It takes place within a “cosmos of ideas” where “the interdependencies and interrelations between ideas” are seen as united.²⁶ But what does this mean? Rommen appears to ground the dialectic of spheric thinking

¹⁹ *The State in Catholic Thought*, p. 436.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 231-32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

in the traditional natural law understanding of the state as a *unitas ordinis* arranged according to a “hierarchical economy of ends.”²⁷ In doing so, he adopts the Thomistic understanding of causality: form “as active agent is the nature, the *causa finalis*,” and “as final end,” it becomes the criterion of judgment for any being: “the most perfect realization of its nature, of its idea, becomes the end of the thing.”²⁸ He applies this teleological view to the political and social nature of man and to the understanding of the state: as social life is “an intentional form of life for the individual,” so the state in this conception is “the *terminus ad quem* of the teleological perfection of nature.” For all its focus on individualism, modernity neglects the possibility that the “individual’s very individuality,” his neediness, points to natural sociality.²⁹ And, given this understanding of the state, the Catholic position does not begin with “the concept of the individual” or the idea of the collective, those “modern abstractions” so “unable to explain reality.” Rather, at its heart there abides the “idea of a cosmos of the spheres of life,” stretching from the individual as person, touching upon the “intermediary” associations, and leading finally to “the comprehensive political sphere.”³⁰ Insofar as the state represents an economy of ends, every social form, however secondary, contributes its own unique good to the political community as a whole. The Catholic principle of subsidiarity, with its traditional emphasis on the independence and autonomy of various social forms, has its roots in this conception. The state may indeed possess a comprehensive end, but it must never interfere with, let alone abolish, the lower forms; “the upper form does not make the lower forms superfluous.”³¹ There is no idea more central to Rommen’s analysis than the principle of subsidiarity. He speaks eloquently of the “three essentially different circles of human existence,” finding in them a “symbiotic” relation, where each circle is distinct, yet not “utterly separated” from the others.³² The first circle, “the intimate sphere” of the “individual person as such,” is the locus of the human personality, “immortal and in himself an individual and irreplaceable value.”³³ The idea of the person is the “starting point of all social philosophy,” whether one begins with “natural rights” or civic duties. The family, despite all its cultural and historical variation, occupies a “second circle.” Though its domain may be confined initially to the *vita economica*, its traditional emphasis

²⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 135. It would be wrong to claim that Rommen identifies the Catholic political tradition with Thomism. While he sometimes associates it with the Thomist tradition (at one point contrasting the antinomies of modernity with the “great harmony of Thomism”), in other passages, as we have noted, he assigns the Thomist position to a specific pole in the “cosmos of ideas.” There is no contradiction here, for he ultimately regards the Thomistic synthesis as an example of “Christian theory”: “Every high point in Christian theory is a time of concordance. St. Thomas produced a concordance between Aristotle and Christian tradition; the late Scholastics, of Thomism and Augustinianism; modern times have produced concordances in social philosophy.” Ibid., p. 84.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

³¹ Ibid., p. 301.

³² Ibid., p. 376.

³³ Ibid., p. 377.

on the procreation and care of children must necessarily include “spiritual goods” as well as material ends.³⁴ Nevertheless, the “social relations between families and individual adults,” and the resulting “conflicts of interests and rights,” cannot be resolved through the limited means available to the *paterfamilias*. The comprehensive political circle, over which the state rules, must provide “a protective coordinating and mediating organization with supreme authority.”³⁵ Responsible for the “common good” understood as the “order of peace and justice,” the state can never be a substitute family.

In their interpenetration, the “circles of human existence” form the *unitas ordinis*, an interdependent community that is also a *unitas diversitas*.³⁶ The very complexity of this understanding of the state assures the failings of linear modernity: if “social life moves in indestructible concentric circles,” as Rommen suggests, then political thinking must respect the outlines, the boundaries, that political life presents to it; it must embrace the “total political problem” in all its complexity. This is exactly what the spheric thinking of the tradition sets out to do; and this is also why the utopianism and progressivism, so typical of modernity, is absent from the mainstream Catholic political tradition.

The *Distinctio Christiana* of Catholic Political Thought

Throughout his study, Rommen repeatedly attempts to defend the tradition against the charge that it is a “*complexio oppositorum*.” But if the unity of polar tension is the *distinctio christiana* of Catholic political thought, it cannot help but avoid “one-sided exaggerations”; shifting back and forth between poles, it will exhibit at one and the same time “conservative principles and flexible progressivism.”³⁷ It is never a “static and brittle system”; its “polarism” is subject to “an everlasting process.”³⁸ In light of modern categories, this tension in political thought reveals itself in the conservative/ liberal dichotomy. The terms “conservative” and “liberal” are open to misunderstanding, but their significance for Rommen has to do with their peculiar judgment on the status of modern liberal democracy. He maintains that the tradition is “philosophically and morally indifferent” to the question of “the forms of government.” The status of any regime, whether democracy or traditional monarchy, ultimately “depends on (its) actual service ... to the realization of the common good.”³⁹ Liberal democracy may foster “a great perhaps too optimistic faith in freedom,” nevertheless its “institutions and political principles” are defensible in terms of Catholic political thought.⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid., p. 378.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 379.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 20, 23.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 477.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 484-85.

What is striking in Rommen's account of the conservative/liberal split is the balance he brings to his discussion of political imbalance. The prototypical conservative mind-set rejects liberal democracy for "its easy-going optimism," and for its over-emphasis on the individual. The conservative adopts a "delicate cultural pessimism" because he knows that "culture" cannot be discovered "in the mass civilization of a mass production era"; it is rather nurtured through a tradition, through "the wisdom and learning" transmitted through time. It demands a "stable, solid order." The modern idea of infinite progress represents the very negation of the "traditional way of life, of the historical culture of a particular nation."⁴¹ The conservative distrusts democracy because he distrusts "the sovereignty of the masses": a democratic mass possesses "no dignity and therefore no gift of distinction." He longs nostalgically for the ancestral, for "the soils and the forests, the farms and old small towns, the guilds of the Middle Ages."⁴² Similar to his secular counterpart, the Catholic conservative engages in an "unjustified glorification" of the medieval period, forgetting that "the social and economic life" of that era left much to be desired.⁴³ He "dislikes capitalism" not only because it subjects "the laborer to a cruel and inescapable rule of the profit motive," but also because its promised egalitarianism is illusory; it does not produce a free-market utopia, but "a hideous economic hierarchy ... without regard to moral value." It is only the presence of the Church, "the greatest conservative power," that sustains the Catholic conservative: the Church remains for him "the continuous admonition" to the world "that there are higher values than profit and material pleasures."⁴⁴ The historical embodiment of this mind-set Rommen identifies with the Catholic political romantics of the nineteenth century. Reacting to the "overwhelming rationalism and anarchism" of the French Revolution, they pressed the "traditional rights of the crown" against "the concept of popular sovereignty." They did so "with some sacrifice of balance," forgetting in their rejection of the political ideas of the Enlightenment, that the underlying political institutions may not only be morally indifferent, but "may be defended and upheld on the basis of Catholic political thought."⁴⁵

Rommen's analysis of the liberal mind-set of the Catholic tradition is equally instructive, and especially prescient. The Catholic liberal, though aware of the importance of custom, will be "free from an overesteem of tradition." He does not promote "the abstract liberty" of modernity, but political liberty "under the rule of law equal for all." The liberal will choose "progressive justice" even though, in doing so, he knows it may be "risking a threat to the public order." While seeking "to enlarge in social and political life the sphere of consent," he works at the same

⁴¹ *The State in Catholic Thought*, p. 493.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 494.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 488.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

time “to restrict the sphere of domination and compulsion.”⁴⁶ He is “less pessimistic” than the conservative regarding human nature, and holds “an unconditional reverence” before “the dignity of the individual person.” He does not distrust “democratic opinion” because, believing as he does in the rationality of each man, he knows each has “access to objective truth.”⁴⁷ Rejecting romantic nostalgia, he has no longing for “a precapitalistic and pre-democratic era.”⁴⁸ Since he values most “justice *hic et nunc*,” he is a “great champion of social reform,” and “of the rights of the socially underprivileged.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, this liberal tendency also is “subject to extremes.” If the conservative attitude risks “mummification” in its praise of traditional forms, the liberal attitude neglects the “value of tradition.” If the conservative attitude fosters an indifference to “social justice,” the liberal “might underestimate the growth of state activity,” placing the Church completely “at the service of a social gospel activism.”⁵⁰ Throughout his study, Rommen finds ample evidence of this corresponding pole: from the “democratic Americanism” of Father Hecker to the Catholic liberalism of Lord Acton, and the “pro-democratic” natural law writings of Jacques Maritain.

Rommen does not see this polarity as a negative, but as a source of vitality necessary for the life of the Church. The “continuous defense and attack” between conservative and liberal prevents either side “from monopolizing political philosophy.” By keeping “the other from falling into extremes,” each side can learn from its opposite.⁵¹ The conservative, prone to “inflexibility and complacency,” should “seek counsel from the liberals”; the liberal, given to novelty and social change, should consider conservative prejudices. To fail to do so is to risk losing the “*distinctio christiana*”: to raise the possibility of the conservative uncritically approving any regime he deems sufficiently anti-democratic, or the liberal “forgetting that social progress and secular happiness are not enough as the goal of life.” The ever-present danger is to fall into a type of linear thinking that destroys the fruitful polarity of the Catholic tradition.

The Unity of Polar Tension and the Idea of Man.

The unity of polar tension is not only the *distinctio christiana* of Catholic political philosophy, it remains for Rommen the distinctive mark of human nature. The tradition maintains that man himself possesses an “antithetic character”; he “lives in a sphere of tension,” “a tension arising from a polar opposition of diverse principles.” These “antithetical concepts” represent “the poles out of which life comes, between which arises its stresses and strains, between which it goes on.” Both as believer and citizen, a human being must seek ever “to unite,” to balance

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 496-97.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 497.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 498.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 496.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 499.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 500.

in a “*concordantia discordantia*” these “haunting antitheses.”⁵² Thus, the unity of tension that is man remains an imperfect image of the unity of God: the “ceaseless effort” to unite the poles of reason and will, or nature and will, is nothing less than “a perpetual striving to produce the *concordantia* as it lives in God who is pure intellect, omnipotent will, perfect goodness and unlimited love.”⁵³ The consideration of man leads by ascent to a contemplation of the perfect goodness and unity in God. Catholic political theory is thus grounded in an anthropology that reflects theology; and it is no surprise that Rommen is fond of quoting Proudhon that “all political problems are at last theological problems.” He makes this connection explicit in his chapter on “The Idea of Man,” a remarkable discussion that serves both as a philosophical anthropology and an example of spheric thinking at its best. He divides the chapter into two parts. In the first half, he examines a series of modern philosophical positions: in his analysis, each modern claim not only represents a polar extreme, a turning away from “unity,” but also contains an underlying theological problem. In the second part, he explores the idea of man in Catholic thought. By showing how the tradition balances the polar tendencies in modernity, Rommen skillfully weaves together a history of modern positions, a critique of linear extremes, and a presentation of the *concordantia discordantia* that is Catholic political philosophy.

He begins with a short treatment of Hobbes and Rousseau who occupy opposite poles on the question of the “natural goodness of man.” Rousseau’s optimistic portrait of the “natural status,” among other things, denies the possibility of Christian theology, because theology “knows the force of evil, knows that the nature of man is weak, inclined to evil and in need of supernatural help and redemption.”⁵⁴ Hobbes’ “deep pessimism concerning human nature,” however, presents a philosophical anthropology that serves as the basis for “the origin of the state and its lasting justification.”⁵⁵ The Leviathan’s power must be “unlimited” and unrestrained because of the “selfish, reckless and evil” character of man; in order to control that nature, the Sovereign must control the civic theology.⁵⁶ Since Hobbes holds a “pre-Christian contempt for the specific Christian virtues of truth, charity, and humility,” the “contradictory” poles of Hobbes and Rousseau are equally “unchristian.”⁵⁷

Rommen next examines two theological positions that hold extreme views on the relation of nature and grace. For Luther, “original sin had so utterly destroyed the goodness of human nature that even grace did not reform its inner malignity.” In his theology, nature “is separated from the realm of supernature,” and the lone

⁵² Ibid., p. 282.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

“guiding principle” for human action becomes the “revealed Word.”⁵⁸ When the state is considered “a consequence of sin,” political theory suffers: once human reason is unable “to recognize natural law,” and the human will unable to “strive for it,” the state lacks any basis in rationality, and consequently, any political order could be “sanctioned at least as long as the integrity of the gospel is not wholly destroyed.”⁵⁹ Calvinism agrees at most points with this theology, but it possesses “a less pessimistic attitude” toward political things partly because the Old Testament for Calvin is “exclusively a source of political theory.” The state cannot be established on natural law principles, but Scripture provides a divine “pattern of the constitutional life in its most minute particulars.”⁶⁰ The citizens of the Calvinist theocracy or “bibliocracy” are “the holy people of God, the chosen people.” The Calvinist doctrine of predestination lends credence to the “political predestination” of the rule of the “noble, wise and virtuous.” The notion of the “holy people” may give Calvinism a “republican character,” but it is, in essence, “an aristocracy of the redeemed.”⁶¹ Central to both Reformers, however, is “the separation of nature and grace”: because of their emphasis on the utter depravity of the human condition, they could not employ the “social nature of man” as a basis “for any morally good act.”⁶² It is finally their interpretation of the doctrine of original sin that compels them to deny any ground to natural law and political philosophy.

Yet Enlightenment rationalism revived both natural law and political theory, replacing the “theological basis” of the Reformers with “secularized rights” and “a more optimistic idea” of human nature. It introduced an understanding of natural law that provided a novel “philosophical basis” for liberal democracy.⁶³ Unfortunately, the good rationalist of the eighteenth century became the good pagan agnostic of the nineteenth century, who “abandoned his smiling optimism” for a “disillusioned” relativism.⁶⁴ This happened, Rommen suggests, because modern rationalism neglected the “*homo religiosus*”: that is, in seeking to avoid the sectarian extremes of the Reformers, it forgot that the foundation of its political theory was built upon a “Christian inheritance,” that its principles were “secularized Christian ideals.” The “mild skepticism” of the nineteenth century became the “irrationalism” of the early twentieth. The emptying of the “religious sphere” resulted both in the recognition of a “*horror vacui*,” the realization that the gods that “animated” modernity had “fallen,” and in a corresponding longing for new gods. “Quasi-religious collectivism” attempted to fill this vacuum with “new myths,” yet its political “mysticism” was no substitute for the Christian tradition. Its idea of man was thoroughly “depersonalized”; it lacked “an interior life,” and “that vivid feeling

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁶² Ibid., p. 69.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 70.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

of finiteness and imperfection.”⁶⁵ This “new politicized faith” was “extroverted and secularized ... anti-intellectual and non-moral.” It exploited an “aimless political dynamism” in man, a nihilistic “inner restlessness” that issued only in “external destruction.” At this point, Rommen reminds the reader of “the invisible but quite real connection between man as a religious being and man as a rational being.” But the decline of modern rationalism into totalitarian “irrationalism,” the transformation of “useless autonomy” into “the individual’s unconditional surrender to irrational mass feelings,” began with the Reformers’ separation of nature and grace. This separation triggered the consequent depreciation of the religious sphere in modern political thought. The neglect of the *homo religiosus*, the separation of reason and religion, which for Rommen is the separation of man from his creatureliness, paved the way for “quasi-religious collectivism” and its creation of the God-state. “Any political philosophy neglecting the truth that man is ‘religious’ cannot avoid the alternative of either anarchy or God-state with all its consequences.”⁶⁶ The “irrationalism” of totalitarianism is a direct result of the linear extremes of modernity.

Rommen now contrasts his critique of modernity with a presentation of the philosophical anthropology underlying Catholic thought. The tradition grounds its view in the rational, social nature of man. Sociality embraces every aspect of life, even “the innermost thinking” of the individual person.⁶⁷ Human nature is so radically social that “there is no experience of the community through which individuality does not shine, and no experience of individuality which is not borne by community and open to it.”⁶⁸ Moreover, the traditional notion of law “as an order of reason” implies that law is addressed to, and established for, “rational beings” who can judge the reasonableness of its commands. Rommen clearly frames this position in direct opposition to the theological view taken by the early Reformers: the state in Catholic thought does not arise from original sin, but is the natural end of human beings, both “redeemed and unredeemed.” Though nature is damaged by the effects of sin, it is not destroyed. The Reformers’ separation of nature and grace is contrasted with the “famous Thomist principle” that “grace presupposes nature and perfects it.” The Catholic position thus provides a “bridge between religion as grace and the world as the field of reason and natural ethics.”⁶⁹

The attributes of rationality and sociality, Rommen now argues, embody “the whole content of the concept of the natural law and the idea of human dignity.”⁷⁰ For the first time in this chapter, he explicitly refers to the idea of polarity, and it arises in a surprising context. In assessing this understanding of human dignity,

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

critics contend that it is contradicted by the Catholic tradition's casual acceptance of political exigencies like capital punishment. Rommen responds that the paradoxical "coincidence of human dignity and political power" in Catholic thought is nothing less than the "same polarity" found in the idea of human nature. Man may not be thoroughly corrupted, but he is nevertheless "inclined to evil, to a selfishness threatening the just peaceful order." In the end, the polarity in man is a consequence of his fallen condition.⁷¹ More important for our study is the rhetorical movement of Rommen's discussion here: just after he condemns the Reformers for their extreme position, he reminds the reader that a consideration of original sin remains a significant factor in Catholic political theory. The tradition embraces the Thomistic position on nature and grace, but it must still think between two poles; it must measure the rational and social nature of man against the revelational fact of original sin. And it is this understanding that gives Catholic political theory its "characteristic elasticity": it can accept "almost all political forms as they appear in the history of nations."⁷²

But Rommen is not finished with his examination of modern extremes. The "dignity of man as a rational and free being," receives "a more exalted meaning" in the understanding that the "human person is an image of God."⁷³ This "addition," of "incomparable importance," is "revolutionary," involving as it does "a new concept of freedom" and the "ultimate equality of all" before God. Rommen here addresses the problem in modern rationalism: because the understanding of man as "*imago dei*" must include the idea of man as "*homo religiosus*," the Catholic position connects rationality and religion; and it thus avoids the exaggerated rationality so disastrous for modern rationalism. For the second time in the chapter, he refers to the idea of polarity. Critics charge that conservative Catholic thinkers (De Maistre and Cortes), far from finding the roots of liberal democracy in the idea of "*imago dei*," appear more sympathetic to authoritarian or anti-democratic regimes. Rommen points out that those thinkers focused almost exclusively on one polar extreme: they "overstressed the wounding of human nature by sin" and doubted the capacity of human reason to "control dangerous passions." This

⁷¹ Rommen here obviously includes certain revelational factors in his philosophical examination of "The Idea of Man." Yet, in his preface, he denies that Catholic political philosophy "is based on theology or revelation." Given all this, one wonders about the specific character of philosophy in his account: in other words, what is the relation between political theory and revealed theology? There is no space here to discuss the question at length, but I might suggest that, while Rommen supports the traditional distinction between philosophy and theology, he allows for the possibility that political theory remain open to, and thus may be influenced by, the truths of revelation. After rejecting the "political theology" of nineteenth-century Catholic conservatives, he notes: "This repudiation of political theology follows the traditional Thomistic doctrine of the distinction between ... natural reason and revelation. This distinction does not mean 'separation' as if 'theology,' the revealed word of God, and the positive divine law as distinguished from natural law, were under no circumstances of any influence on political philosophy and political ethics and on political institutions ... Theology will always be of help and assistance to political philosophy." *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

interpretive digression is much like the earlier one. When critics questioned the Catholic “coincidence of human dignity and political power” with respect to the issue of capital punishment, Rommen stressed the polar tendency of original sin; here, after responding to criticism suggesting the anti-democratic character of Catholic thought, he swings back to the other pole, admitting that the emphasis on original sin has been, and can be, exaggerated in the tradition.

On the question of “the idea of man,” then, modernity does involve a “philosophy of antinomies, of separations.” And each imbalance, each extreme, harbors a corresponding theological problem. Reformation thinking separates nature and grace, denying the possibility of natural law and political theory. Modern rationalism divides rationality from religion only to remove the underlying basis for that very rationality. And, after the degeneration of rationalism, collectivism ushers in a new “irrationalism” and the “politicized faith” of the God-state. By contrast, the spheric thinking of the tradition joins together, in a harmonious “cosmos of ideas,” nature and grace, reason and revelation, religion and rationality. The distance between the Catholic understanding and the ideological tendencies of late modernity is especially striking when one juxtaposes Rommen’s comments on the unity of tension with his remarks about collectivism. The collectivist man suffers, he says, from an “aimless political dynamism” and “an inner restlessness” that results in “external destruction.” To Catholic political philosophy, man lives in tension, but this “inner restlessness” embodies a “dynamic life” striving for restfulness in God. Thus “life and philosophy remain venturesome” for Rommen, since “only the final redemption, the lasting rest in God, will end the striving.”⁷⁴ While the antinomies of modernity issue in the loss of man, the loss of the creature, the “unity of polar tension” is finally a metaphor for man’s limitations, and “that vivid feeling of finiteness and imperfection.”

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 473.