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When Cain builds man's first city, designed to protect the first murderer from those who would come after him, God provides one of its laws, the law of sevenfold vengeance. The family of any murderer is to suffer seven times as many deaths in punishment of the original crime. Cain's city then is a remedy, assented to by God, for the evil and violence of men, but not given God's blessing! It is governed by evil and violent men who restrain each other in their evil doing only by terrifying them with greater evils still.

At Mount Sinai, God establishes a city of another kind altogether, "a People peculiarly his own." He is its sovereign and he provides all its laws. He means to be clear on this, and so in the First Commandment, he identifies himself and declares himself sovereign: *I AM the LORD, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, that place of slavery.... You shall have no strange gods besides me.*

The Israelites covenant themselves to be ruled by the maker of heaven and earth, by the possessor of all the other nations, while they themselves are to be uniquely his own. They are not to be ruled like the other nations, according to the ways of the ancestors or the supposed order of the cosmos, or by the strength of strong men; they are to be ruled by God himself and in this way are set apart from everyone else in the world as the uniquely Chosen People.

Choseness however is not to go to their heads! Immediately after the First Commandment

comes the Second: *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.* God's "name" here is not merely a verbal identifier. Rather, "name" is shorthand for authority

, as when we say that the US government acts "in the name of the People." Because the Israelites at Sinai become God's People, they bear his "name;" they live under his authority and in a certain way represent that authority before the rest of the nations. They are not to suppose, however, that because they are the People of the universal God, they are therefore themselves to be universal rulers! They are "peculiarly" God's own; they are set apart from the nations, subject often to the rage of the nations, as it says in the Second Psalm, but not rulers over them! They are not to invoke God's name as justification for expanding power, building empire and lording it over the nations. The Second Commandment forbids just exactly this. Taking God's name in vain means their using God's name to legitimate their own claims to universal sovereignty when the whole point of the events at Sinai is to reveal

God

as sovereign, not Moses or the Israelites or anything or anybody else whatever. What political authority was to be exercised by Moses or later by the judges of Israel or later still by the kings, was limited, always to be subordinated to God's sovereignty as he continued to address Moses and, later on, as he addressed the kings through the prophets.

God's exercise of his authority was no easy matter—the Hebrews were a "stiff necked People." As it turns out, the kings, too, had a tough time of it, not merely because the people they governed were difficult but especially because the kings themselves weren't keen on obeying the prophets. In fact, the whole effort to align human politics with divine sovereignty in Israel proved exceedingly difficult, perhaps impossible. Even David, who was the king very best at restraining himself in deference to God's sovereignty, toward the end of his life overstepped his proper limits, ordered a census to tighten his grip on the nation, reaching toward sovereignty, and thus provoked God's anger, in effect demonstrating the ultimate implausibility of any happy marriage between God and Israel's political order.

What were the odds, then, that Rome, with roots deep in pagan antiquity, the Rome which persecuted Christians and made war against the Jews and drove them out of Jerusalem...what were the odds that Rome would do a better job than David himself in yielding to the sovereignty of God? What were the odds that the Rome, which destroyed the Second Temple, would do better than Solomon, who built the First? Solomon used his famous wisdom to acquire international influence, and so could dream imperial dreams as he forged marriage ties with the surrounding pagan nations. But in this reach for sovereignty he set into motion events that would eventually destroy Israel's experiment with monarchy, bring down Jerusalem and the Temple (where God had "placed his name forever") and send his people in exile back to Babylon from which, fifteen hundred years before, poor Abraham had first set out! What were the odds that Roman Christendom would do better than Solomon and not take God's name in vain...or not, in its turn, also deservedly fall?

Good things came from Cain's city—Genesis lists the arts that developed there. Good things came from Egypt—it saved the Hebrews from famine and provided conditions within which they and their flocks could thrive. Very great and shining good things came from Rome's accommodation with Christianity. Aside from its unmatched cultural efflorescence, Rome's relation with the Church was to some degree a move away from its former idolatry. No longer would men be forced to bow in worship of the *genius* of the emperor; on the contrary all Christendom's people were taught that they were themselves made in the image and likeness of God and thus that political power ought in some way to bow rather to them! A great reversal of the ancient order of things had been set in motion. God's sovereignty was expressed in the dignity of man which the political order had in some way to acknowledge.

But ambitious men are not satisfied with limited power. Shared sovereignty is a contradiction in terms. The ambition of Adam, his urge—what the Jews call *ha-yetzer ha-rah*— is to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, get the knowledge he needs to rule on his own, and become the center of all he surveys. The orderly world of Christendom, grounding its political institutions in the claim to rule in God's name as vouched for by ranking clergy at the center of the political cosmos, was vulnerable to exposure by those who came after them and who, in their turn, claimed to act in the name of God!

If Christendom claimed legitimacy because it bowed before the image of God in its subjects and because it assumed responsibility for their well-being and defense, it also assumed for itself the authority of God in doing so, saw *itself* as bearing the image of God, and expected its subjects to bow before it. If Christendom saw the Body of Christ as mediating the Presence of God to the world, it inclined to see itself as that Body, identifying itself with the Church which cannot be identified with any body politic whatever. The mission of the Church is catholic, addressed to the whole of the world. Christendom was in part seeing itself as actually or properly the whole and ruled on the basis of its claim to knowledge of the whole. Its task then was to order men to their various properly designated places and functions within the whole, thus subordinating them to its idea of the whole and *not* therefore reverencing them as the living image and likeness of the God beyond the world.

There were two conflicting bases of legitimacy at work here, the one which comes from the self-limitation of government before the image of God revealed in the Anointed One, in Man, and the other from the self-understanding of that government as the sovereign order which in itself represents the ultimate limits of all things and requires therefore undivided loyalty and universal submission.

To the extent that the Church acted on the basis of its own proper authority and served as prophetic check on political claims, the light of revelation shone in the darkness of politics, illuminating and rescuing those dimensions of the human soul not to be hemmed in by nature or the force of men.

But to the extent that churchmen defined the universal Church as “Verus Israel,” linking the People of the new and universal Covenant to a political function proper only to the People of the First Covenant set peculiarly apart from the nations, something went wrong.

Those churchmen were allowing themselves and their institutions to be co-opted by the political project. A supersessionist theology denied Israel's particular enduring and revelatory place in history and permitted Christendom to see itself alone as complete, a universal political whole, to be understood therefore not scripturally, by reference to the peculiar history of God's Chosen, but rather *naturally*, by reference to the old pagan and classical understanding of the cosmos. To the extent that this was so, darkness ruled, the proper dignity of the subjects of Christendom was violated, their rightful freedom denied, and as for the Jews, who stood apart steadfastly rejecting such universal claims, the anti-Semitism of Christendom raged.

Thus it came to be that, in the name of a divine authority in men which, precisely because of the Scriptural tradition, was understood and felt to be prior to any political authority, the religious thinkers of the Reformation, and after them the political thinkers of the Enlightenment, could raise powerful religious and moral objections to the claims of Christendom, its kings and its princes. Furthermore, Enlightenment thinkers, supported by their new natural science, happily stripped a shocked and astonished Christendom of its legitimating but illusory vision of the whole of the cosmos, and so could assume as well the moral high ground of truth itself, to laugh at “the Kingdom of Darkness,” (as Hobbes called it) which Christendom had been shown to be.

In the Scriptural understanding, the world achieves its completion and purpose in its submission to man who has dominion over it by virtue of his status as image of God, that is, as *recipient* of the authoritative self-revelation of the Creator himself to the man. Man's authority over nature is

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on the basis of openness or obedience to the authority of God. As with the Scriptural understanding, the thinkers of modernity understood the incompleteness of nature without the rule of man, and they asserted the authority of man over nature—Bacon, for example, refers explicitly to Genesis in claiming the rightfulness of man's dominion over the universe. But the revelation of God in history is accomplished by way of a People chosen and set apart from the nations, and by way of God's Chosen, the Anointed One, and is given

authoritatively

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against the Church. The authority of man over the universe, as claimed by the Enlightenment, was based not on God's revelation to man from beyond nature, but only on what was said to be man's "right," immanent within nature, universally, without reference to the transcendent God in his revelation of himself in the concrete/authoritative particularity of his People in history.

Scripture's vision of the world or nature as creatively called into being to serve man, as incomplete without man, as having no necessity in itself, as arising out of void and as capable or falling back into that void, and as having therefore no authority in itself over man, becomes the modern vision of nature as "standing reserve," object of man's willful intervention and dominance, and this, again, as a matter of man's own right with no reference to authority above himself.

The classical interpretation of nature, flawed though it was, nevertheless provided salutary limit, direction and goals to the life of man; Scripture rejects the classical understanding and displays rather the authoritative self-revelation of God in the Law given to his People. The Law, and the Covenantal bond with God which the Law enshrines, and the New Covenant which the Law prepares, provide true limit, direction and goal for God's People. But Christendom, abandoning the revelatory status of the Jews in history, lapsed back toward the natural understanding of the world and produced the hybrid of "natural law," linking divine authority with the structures of nature regarded as also authoritative. Modernity uncovers flaws in the classical understanding of nature, but in rejecting nature's authority over man along with the authority of Christendom and of the People of God, it asserts an authority of man over nature that is unbounded, undirected, autonomous, *sui generis*, a "right" said to be by nature but rooted not in nature or the body, but in some sort of "thinking thing," the contracting political mind and the objectifying scientific mind, together constituting what Nietzsche would more accurately call "will-to-power." From the viewpoint of the tradition, however, it is the *yetzer*

ha-rah

, the evil urge itself, complete, undiluted and unrestrained, still energetically at work, and all with the moral assurance of those whose eyes have opened and have become like God!

Christendom was surely flawed, ambiguous, marked by some deep confusions and illusions. But among its limitations were the limits imposed by a profoundly true sense of the sinfulness of men, of the transcendent loftiness of the human vocation, and of what is at stake in the choices men make. If according to the Scriptures, the cosmos finds its goal and perfection in man raised up to God, and so lapses back to the floods of chaos when man rebels, then the modern

project aiming at unbounded mastery of the physical world undoes the world. Nature is not the guide to man; it is his subject. It is his victim, therefore, when he is not guided by the authority that stands over him...and it is his own nature, more than that of the rest of things, that is most inundated and torn apart in the process.