Freedom and the Human Person

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For friends of liberty, the early 21st century has been a confusing time. We are living through a period of rapid and perhaps unprecedented social and economic change, and our established ways of thinking about public questions have not been serving us well. Regaining our balance will require us to open our eyes to the simultaneously disturbing and encouraging trends before us. But perhaps more than that, we are both required and have the opportunity to reflect anew on who we are as free and relational persons. We can and must think more deeply about the contents of a fully human life, as knowing who we are is an indispensable prelude to figuring out what to do to sustain the future of personal and political liberty.

Some of our most familiar political and intellectual categories, adapted to suit 20th-century debates, now cause us to fall into a simple-minded individualism that we cannot really believe. Too many conservatives, for instance, persist in the tired distinction between individual freedom and collectivism. That unrealistic bifurcation helped discredit the communist or fascist reduction of the particular person to nothing but an expendable cog in a machine, plugging away in pursuit of some glorious paradise to come at the end of History. But today that distinction too often ends up placing in the same repulsive category any understanding of the person as a relational part of a larger whole—of a country, family, church, or even nature. It thus causes conservatives to dismiss what students of humanity from Aristotle to today’s evolutionary psychologists know to be true: that we social animals are “hardwired”...
by instinct to find meaning in serving personal causes greater than ourselves, and that reconciling freedom with personal significance is only possible in a relational context that is less about rights than about duties.

The same simpleminded individualism leaves us unsure about how to approach the difficulties of the modern American economy. Given the complicated challenges posed by globalization, the fading away of the middle class, the breakdown of the family among the poor, the growing economic distance separating our “cognitive elite” from the increasingly “marginally productive” ordinary American, and the indisputable need to trim our entitlements in order to save them (for a while), our ways of speaking about responsibility, work, mobility, and opportunity seem increasingly out of touch.

Everyone knows that success in the marketplace requires skills and habits that are usually acquired through good schools, strong families, active citizenship, and even solicitous and judgmental churches. Those relational institutions, however, are threatened, in different ways, by the unmediated effects of both the market and big, impersonal government. We also know that most people find that worthy lives are shaped by both love and work, and that the flourishing of love and work are interdependent. We even know that love and work are both limits on government, even as we know that middle-class Americans who have good jobs, strong families, and “church homes” are also our best citizens.

What we really know should point our political life in rather definite directions. Does our familiar political vocabulary provide us what we need to articulate those directions? Or does it confuse us more in this already confusing time? We have every reason to wonder whether even conservative Americans have access to a plausible account of the reality of our personhood, an account that could serve as the foundation of a public philosophy that would properly limit and direct a sustainable political life for free persons. What we lack most is an authentically empirical theory adequate to the complexities of American life in our time.

The natural inclination of any conservative is to seek out such a theory in our deep and diverse tradition of liberty, rather than invent one out of whole cloth. And if our search is guided by a sense of how our changing circumstances require us to reflect on the relational character of the human person, our tradition will not disappoint. But we have no choice but to look beyond the most familiar fixtures of that tradition

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toward some neglected American theorists of liberty who have highlighted the shortcomings of an overly individualistic understanding of American life. Complacently excessive individualism is the opiate of the American “public intellectuals” of our time.

One neglected resource in correcting for that excess is America’s most original and deepest 19th-century thinker: Orestes Brownson. Author of The American Republic (published in 1865) and of much more, Brownson explained that our country’s “providential constitution” is deeper and more comprehensively compelling than the Lockean theorizing of Jefferson and other leading founders and framers. Our framers, who built for the ages as great statesmen do, drew from all the sources that history, philosophy, political precedent, religion, and the rest of our civilized tradition had given them. It is because they built as statesmen, and not as abstract theorists, that they built better than they knew.

For Brownson, to think clearly about both our Constitution and about particular human beings means avoiding the excesses of thinking too universally (or abstractly) or too particularly (or selfishly). It requires finding a mean between the two extremes of American political thought. On one side, Americans properly appropriate the truthful dogma of human equality, and remembering that all persons equally possess rights is what directs us away from the excessive concern for particularity that characterized aristocratic Southerners in Brownson’s time, with all their secessionist, racist, and even pagan impulses. But at the opposite extreme, humanitarians and their abstract egalitarianism — like some transcendentalist, pantheist Northerners in Brownson’s time — have divorced the theory of equality from its properly personal theological context. What remains is an empty universalism that overvalues the possibilities for redemption in political reform and denies the truth about personal being, and therefore about personal rights. As the Yankee Brownson acknowledged, despite their many faults, the Southerners were right to defend the particularity of relational individuality; they claimed to know and love real persons and so to have no need for any interest in abstract “humanitarianism.”

The American, constitutional mean between abstract universalism and tribal secessionism, according to Brownson, is a limited political unity of citizens who know they are also more than and less than citizens. All of us equally are shaped by natural, personal imperatives having to do with flourishing as material, political, and spiritual beings.
When we forget any of the three, we fall into trouble. The material being is concerned with the personal subsistence of himself and his family. The political being is concerned with the common good shared by citizens in a “territorial democracy” in a particular part of the world. The spiritual being is concerned with discovering his relational duties to his loving personal Creator and sharing that personal news with his fellow creatures through the church.

The fully human being attends to all three parts of who he is as a free and relational person born to know, love, and die. He doesn’t regard himself as less than he really is by thinking of himself as only a producer and consumer or only a citizen, and he doesn’t think of himself as more than he is by confusing his limited and dutiful freedom with the unlimited freedom of God.

This full account of who each of us is means that the economy, the family, and the church aren’t to be politicized. True theology is “catholic” in the sense of not being the exclusive preserve of a particular political community or merely “civil theology.” This full account of the person’s relational responsibilities also means that the political community is for more than serving the selfish needs of particular persons; politics doesn’t exist for the sake of economics. Thus loyalty to your country is a real and indispensable virtue—one, Brownson says, particularly lacking in any country too obsessed with rights. What raises the country above the tribe is that this loyalty is to a genuinely common good, a real conception of justice. The American Constitution, Brownson explains, reconciles “liberty with law, and law with liberty” through the devoted affirmation of mediating constitutional principles such as self-government, federalism, the separation of powers, and religious freedom.

Rightly understood, we can see in Brownson’s idea of law and liberty a theoretical justification for an enduring practice of American liberty that affirms a constitutional order that “secures at once the authority of the public and the freedom of the individual—the sovereignty of the people without social despotism, and individual freedom without anarchy. In other words, its mission is to bring out in its life the dialectic union of authority and liberty, of the natural rights of man and those of society.”

Brownson, at the very least, can help today’s Americans to think seriously about the complex interplay between political and economic
liberties and the relational life of creatures and citizens. It is that kind of thinking that the friends of liberty require if they are to overcome the confusion that defines our time.

**PERSONHOOD AND POLITICAL ECONOMY**

To see how Brownson might help us think about some contemporary challenges, we can begin by looking more closely at the features of America’s current political economy, keeping in mind his view of the whole truth about the free and relational person.

When they think about economics, many conservatives and libertarians focus almost exclusively on the injustice and counter-productivity of constraints on the freedom of entrepreneurs, “job creators,” and members of our cognitive elite. But this perspective is flat and one-dimensional. It fails to consider the legitimate fears of a larger cross-section of our working and middle classes. Many members of the middle class — people who run small businesses, do skilled manual labor, and make up “middle management” — feel less and less secure these days, and with good reason. The various “safety nets” that cushioned workers and their families from market competition are eroding: Unions and various forms of tenure are toast, as are employer and employee loyalty, pensions, and, for many ordinary jobs, even benefits. Some people celebrate the new birth of freedom in which all employees become independent contractors, selling their flexible skills to whoever needs them at the moment. But others talk about the sinking — meaning the decreasing productivity and status — of members of the middle class, especially but not only the bottom half of the middle class. Their skills are worth less than ever, and so even when they work hard they make less and less. Given their inability to find jobs that accord them at least the dignity of providing for those they love (as unionized factory jobs did half a century ago), they sometimes decide that work just isn’t worth it.

Economic inequality is rapidly increasing, and candid libertarian futurists like George Mason University law professor Tyler Cowen acknowledge that this trend will continue. But our libertarians are right that inequality by itself hardly undermines the case for liberty. A prosperous free country is a place where everyone is becoming better off, although some, because of their hard work and natural gifts, are finding far more success than others. Libertarians often point to the progress of technology as benefitting us all. And thanks to technological
development and the global competitive marketplace, productivity has increased. But wages have stagnated, and many Americans don’t see the democratic benefits of the progress of economic liberty.

Meanwhile, our entitlement programs are costing us more, and we can’t afford to fund them as we now do for much longer. In this respect, progressives have mostly become “conservatives” in the precise sense, defending the benefits status quo and often in ways that are misleading or downright dishonest. President Obama lied to many Americans when he said that they could keep the health plans they had, and he misled Americans when he campaigned on the promise that entitlement reform could be avoided. In both cases, he was offering an impossible level of stability. James Capretta, among others, has shown that the future of our entitlement system is imperiled less by our culture of dependency than by our huge demographic transformation. We have too many old people and not enough young and productive ones. So we’re stuck saying that the old need to become more productive — and to some limited extent they can be, given improving health and longevity. The truth is, however, that not all that much can be expected from such remediation.

The primary cause of our entitlement crisis is less the culture of dependency than evolving individualism. While the millennial lifestyle is often discussed as the proof of our society’s increasing individualism, evidence is also abundant among the elderly. People are living longer because they are more attentive, as concerned individuals, to the risk factors that imperil their existence. And they are having fewer children, at least in part because they view generating replacements (out of love) as imposing intolerable burdens on their autonomous and productive lives. There is a connection, of course, between this individualism and dependency: As relational institutions like marriage and churches atrophy, government often ends up stepping in to fill the void. That’s one reason why single women, and especially single mothers, tend to vote Democratic while married women tend to vote Republican.

The impending entitlement implosion will make it hard for the elderly to experience their techno-gift of unprecedented longevity as they should — as a genuine new birth of freedom. We could say they’ll just have to rely more on their families, as their grandparents did in the midst of the Depression. But the disintegration of our relational institutions — including, of course, the intergenerational bonds of family — is reflected in the fact that one of our fastest growing demographic
categories is men over 65 without any close connections to a spouse or children. Part of the new birth of freedom has been the explosion of divorce among parents whose children are finally out of the house. With so many years left, why not be responsive to every aspect of one's quality of life?

All in all, many of our most promising and troubling economic and cultural changes can be traced to an increasingly individualistic philosophy of living. The more consistently individualistic ethic is deeply linked, of course, to the fact that we live in a world in which children are growing rarer and in which marriage is becoming a whimsical lifestyle option rooted solely in feeling in love. Europe is becoming post-political, post-religious, and post-familial, as political philosopher Pierre Manent has observed, and he sees this as a form of progress that is based on hatred of bodies or those relational constraints we necessarily have as social beings born to love and die. And our country, truth to tell, is not that much different now. The libertarian notions that citizenship is just another word for “rent-seeking” and that national borders are nothing but arbitrary barriers to the uninhibited flourishing of the global marketplace are becoming mainstream. Certainly many libertarians and many of our “role models” in Silicon Valley are also easily seduced by the transhumanist impulse that we can live a sempiternal existence as conscious machines.

From this liberationist perspective, it is easy to define social progress as the growing understanding of Americans — men and women, gay and straight — as equally free to determine their personal identities independently of religious and political oppression. Supreme Court justice Anthony Kennedy has been advancing that view for more than two decades, and his outlook is increasingly dominant. Women are free, as Kennedy (with two other justices) said in the plurality opinion in Planned Parenthood v. Casey in 1992, not to understand themselves as mothers and to be unfettered political and economic actors just like men. Gays, Kennedy added in Lawrence v. Texas a decade later, are free to determine what relational autonomy means for themselves, just like straights. Despite government regulation and NSA intrusiveness, these are clearly the best of times to be a free individual.

As determinants of success, race and inherited social status are being replaced by inherited intelligence, the capacity for self-discipline and hard work, the willingness to defer gratification for a bigger payoff
later, and (perhaps above all) technical education and skills. As the Cato Institute’s Brink Lindsey understands it, the successful knowledge worker has a quick-study capacity for abstract (or deracinated) and conceptual (or impersonal) thought, a readiness to process complexity by relating to machines and to people in terms of productive roles and interests. As Tyler Cowen believes, those who are getting more productive and so deservedly wealthier can either work easily with “genius machines” or manage and market those nerds who work so well with the machines. Meanwhile, most Americans are becoming less marginally productive and so “deserve” their stagnant or declining status and wealth.

The result is that America is more of a meritocracy based on productivity than ever. Cowen informs us in his provocative 2013 book, *Average Is Over*, that America is dividing into two increasingly distant economic classes. Average means “middle class”—what Marx called the petite bourgeoisie, or small business owners, skilled laborers, middle management, and the like. Cowen concedes much to Marxism by saying that the techno-progress of capitalism means that America is no longer a middle-class country—that is, a country where most of the features of life are shared in common by the overwhelming majority of citizens.

But Cowen seems blind to how much will be lost in the cause of freedom should his prognostications come true. America’s middle-class orientation inspired its citizens to better themselves by working freely for high levels of income. It is what made Americans uniquely hostile to socialism. This perspective has also made Americans quite judgmental about work and its place in our welfare system. This middle-class view even made us compassionate enough to fund a safety net of entitlements for the “working poor” and those—such as children and the disabled—genuinely unable to care for themselves. Cowen speculates that the safety nets will almost disappear as the classes become so distant from each other that the fabulously rich will resist doing anything much for the seemingly unproductive poor with whom they share little in common.

Who can deny that social mobility is on the decline, as Charles Murray, for one, has explained? The argument that blames the failing members of the lower middle class for their envious lack of virtue, however, might have less and less explanatory value. And if Murray is right about “assortative mating,” then the rich are not only getting richer, they’re getting smarter, too—and so less and less like most Americans.
The real democratic remedies for envy are shared citizenship and shared opportunity, but both are diminishing. And the noblest remedy for envy, of course, is satisfaction with what you have, which is hard to achieve if you don’t have or are losing what it takes to live a dignified relational life.

Envy is also mitigated by the perception that those who have wealth and power deserve what they have—that they are not only good people, but use what they have to display their virtue. But one overlooked disadvantage of the new cognitive or industrious and rational elite is that the virtues that make possible their superiority are the opposite of paternalistic and do not tie them to the lower classes. The aristocracies of old, as Alexis de Tocqueville explains, justified their privileges through their honorable and charitable concern for those for whom they thought of themselves as responsible. They thought they deserved their money and property, which they often did not earn, because they knew how to use them with generosity and class.

Today’s Silicon Valley elite thinks of its contribution to society in terms of innovative and creative forms of productivity, and its relationship to ordinary people in terms of manipulation and control. Libertarians complain about NSA surveillance, but of greater importance is the “big data” (generated in the service of unimaginably huge profits) yielded by the ability of Google and Facebook to capture the intimate details of our lives by monitoring our online activity. Some Silicon Valley billionaires give lots of money away to worthy causes, of course, but they don’t connect their productive activity to any concern for its effects on its consumers.

The original character of Silicon Valley was a joyful combination of productivity with a kind of bohemian self-fulfillment—hippies and other nonconformist misfits who found creative satisfaction through their work. That’s the image still projected by the “Googleplex,” the corporate headquarters of Google. And certainly Silicon Valley embraces the social liberationism of the 1960s and the general cause of “diversity.” But it turns out that techno-creativity is no more easy going than other forms of entrepreneurial productivity. Techno-creativity—or ingenious invention—has always been at the core of modern liberty and prosperity, and it is in Silicon Valley that we see how such invention can be deployed on an almost inconceivably grand scale to transform, liberate, and constrain the ways in which we all live. Members of our cognitive
elite merely exercise a new form of power resulting from their intellectual labor.

Libertarian futurists like Cowen and Lindsey sometimes write as if the whole point of this remarkable techno-progress — the victory of capitalism in the form of the creative power of “human capital” — is to combine the emancipatory spirit of the hippies’ 1960s with the optimistic spirit of liberty in the service of individual productivity of Ronald Reagan’s 1980s. Cowen says that “the light at the end of the tunnel” is the coming of a world in which we will have plenty of everything and all the time in the world to play enjoyable games. Lindsey writes that Marx’s view of communism was wrong in only one respect: In order to live in a world of bohemian enjoyment, we will need to remain productive.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PERSON

Despite these displays of unprecedented individualism and the musings of libertarian futurists, however, there is plenty of evidence that our relational natures persist and will not be satisfied with techno-progress devoid of interpersonal responsibility.

Marriage and parenting may be disappearing in large parts of sophisticated Europe and Japan, but they are certainly not fading among our high achievers. Not only are they marrying; their marriages are stable and involve a shared commitment to the raising of children. Parenthood, of course, cannot quite be called either productive (or paid) work or personal enjoyment. It is a third and more natural category, one Marx could never integrate into his description of unobsessive self-fulfillment at history’s end. Today’s sophisticated parents, for that reason, are actually conservatives when it comes to parental responsibilities.

Their de facto affirmation of marriage highlights the emotional shortcomings of being merely a productive and consuming individual, of being bourgeois and bohemian. Marriage and children move us from thinking about our individual freedom and productivity and toward thinking about the blessings of being embodied and being in love with beings with bodies. There may be nothing more personal and relational than parenting.

Parenting is serious and deliberate in our cognitive-elite families (whose kids are now surging ahead of the rest of society by virtue of both nature and nurture), while it is generally getting worse among most Americans. Although ordinary Americans may have more traditional
“family values” than our sophisticates, they seem less and less capable of acting on them. Their families are getting more pathological, with more single moms, deadbeat dads, and dependence on the government.

To counteract these distressing trends, many libertarians and conservatives stress that public policy should attenuate inequality by preparing as many people as possible for the demands of productive work. This mindset is what drives the federal government’s involvement in the Common Core education standards and its efforts to make students “college and career ready.” Politicians and policymakers have put forward reforms to maximize choice and accountability in education. There have also been proposals for deregulatory and tax-cutting efforts meant to encourage entrepreneurship and job growth, along with other efforts to facilitate upward mobility and wealth creation.

While not disagreeing entirely with this sort of conventional economic analysis, others on the right (a group coming to be known as “reform conservatives”) articulate proposals that focus on facilitating the relational lives of members of our middle class. Tax reform should focus on relief for families and the self-employed. The reformers also emphasize mending—not ending or declaring unconstitutional—the entitlement programs that form a genuine “safety net” and do not serve primarily as a disincentive to work. They insistently remind us that both big government and Silicon Valley’s big data and big technology threaten the small, relational organizations that ordinary people depend upon to find meaning. Families, churches, neighborhoods, and communities provide people with opportunities to be more than productive individuals, and so more than parts of someone else’s script.

This kind of conservatism is also skeptical of the claims that the key to improving ordinary life is simply increasing productivity, and that there is a clear connection between productivity and job creation in our high-tech era. The jobless recovery has been great for those who own stock and other capital and worthless or worse for those who don’t. The percentage of Americans who own stock is on the decline, and that fact alone suggests a bit about the proletarianization of the middle class.

Still, a conservative attuned to Brownson’s whole, relational person must be highly skeptical of any form of reductionist determinism—either Marxist or libertarian—that confidently predicts the inevitability of the dwindling of the middle class into nothing. That confidence is offensive to the aspirations of free men and women to control their
own dignified destiny. A “conservative personalism” similarly rejects the techno-determinist conceit that the arc of our progress is inevitably in the direction of more individual liberty, more money, and more fun. Technological development is a wonderful revelation of human freedom and surely irreversible, but it is also, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, a profound trial of our free will.

**Freedom and Religion**

It is through free will that we subordinate the technological “how” to the personal “why.” This project points us to the ground of our freedom and necessarily prompts the question of its purpose. It therefore returns us to our personal and relational religious heritage. When it comes to religion especially, the current condition of our liberty is confusing.

Freedom of religion is good for political life, insofar as political action can be limited to matters that don’t require the controversial shaping of souls or intrusions into the realm of conscience. But freedom of religion, Alexis de Tocqueville explained, is especially good for religion, as it gives churches the ability to sustain their independence as bodies of thought and action resisting the skeptical, materialistic, and even freedom-denying or passively fatalistic excesses of democracy.

Religion, Tocqueville reminds us, is actually a limit on the freedom of the isolated, self-obsessed individual. The loves and demands it places upon us draw us out of ourselves. Our personal and social duties become magnified in their importance to us. So it is through religion that Americans gain a sense of common morality and common duties, and through religion that Americans grow confident of the equality of all unique and irreplaceable creatures under God. It is through religion that Americans have come to believe that universal education should be more than techno-vocational, because each of us is more than a merely productive being with interests.

Some Americans today celebrate the freeing of the individual from the dogmatic constraints of religious morality and the liberation of personal lives—even spiritual lives—from the constraints of church. Certainly we can no longer say that Americans are bound by a common religious morality when it comes, say, to marriage and the family. And our Supreme Court has led the way in affirming “relational autonomy,” or the individual’s choice about how to construct his free personal identity. A nation that has recently become very pro-choice when it comes to contraception, divorce, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage has
certainly achieved a new birth of freedom from religion in public life. And more and more Americans—although still a fairly small minority—agree with our “new atheists” that “religion poisons everything” and that almost all of the repressive pathologies that have distorted the world can be traced back to religious authority. We can say that Americans are freer than ever from the intrusive influence of churches as organized bodies of thought and action.

But observant religious believers—those who actually deeply identify with religious institutions as sources of personal and relational authority—say we actually have less religious freedom than ever. There is less respect for the teaching authority of the church as a source of the moral guidance that is especially necessary in a democracy—a form of guidance that also limits the authority of government and the market. We no longer seem to be in agreement that the free exercise of religion is freedom for religion and not merely freedom of private conscience. So the Obamacare contraceptive mandate intrudes on the freedom of the church to be an authoritative body for believers. Indeed, the emerging consensus is that a church’s opinions on abortion and marriage are to be dismissed as unreasonable and, if contrary to the prevailing view of rights, no different from the views of racists and other moral idiots. So the display of liberty that is genuine religious diversity is now an offense against “diversity” in the corporate-bureaucratic sense.

Our religious identity is not a political creation, nor is it a wholly privatized or isolated experience of conscience. Religious liberty, as Brownson reminds us, creates room for church as an organized body of thought and action. It is how we relational persons become most open to the truth about who we are. That is not to say that the church, properly understood, asks for more from the state than the recognition that free and relational persons may voluntarily submit to its corporate authority. As Brownson says, all the church needs from government is freedom to evangelize or to shape souls, and our Constitution accords the churches this autonomy.

The trends just described, some critics of American culture contend, show that our Lockean and founding-era idea of liberty (as it has unfolded over history) has always been deeply hostile to the freedom of church as church. As a consequence, genuinely faithful Catholics, for instance, have to oppose themselves to the civilizational wrecking ball that is the American idea of liberty. The situation of Catholics in America, they say, is becoming more and more like the situation of dissidents under communism:
Persecution for one’s faith is just around the corner. These Catholic critics—like Alasdair MacIntyre and Patrick Deneen—now favor a political order more directly concerned with privileging virtue over liberty or directing liberty with virtue. They add that the position of the Church in America is so weak, in part, because so many Catholics have been seduced by the proposition that being a good Catholic can be compatible with being a good American—an idea that is impossible if, like MacIntyre and Deneen, you see being a good American as equivalent to being the free individual that Locke describes. These “traditionalist” Catholic critics are more and more certain that they have little to be grateful for—and so little to be loyal to—in America. From a political point of view, they have become secessionists, opposing their religious duty to the civic spirit.

But there are also serious Catholics, and other moral and social conservatives, who believe in using Lockean or libertarian means for non-libertarian ends. By this they mean that our economic and political liberty can only be affirmed as good for those who deploy their liberty in the service of purposeful, relational lives. Every human being, in truth, is a free economic actor, a citizen, someone’s child (and maybe someone’s parent), and a creature of God. Political activity should largely be about protecting and expanding the space for religious institutions, home schooling, and genuinely countercultural or religious ways of life that will allow people to live out their full relational identities.

These more hopeful conservatives have in mind a compromise that would reject, in light of recent experience, the notion that our churches can combine their charitable functions with the welfare state without undermining their singular missions. But their compromise would insist that those missions can be pursued within the confines of American life. The way to deal with the contraceptive mandate, for instance, would be to get government as far as possible out of the insurance business, and to make the institutional churches in general less dependent on government funding and regulation. In a different way, these libertarian non-libertarians are secessionists too. They want to recover the distinction between a modest public realm and an expansive private realm.

AN AMERICAN THEORY OF LIBERTY

In the spirit (and close to the letter) of Brownson, we should conclude by trying to reconcile both our churches and our libertarians to our country’s civilizing mission. To do this, we have to see the limits of the
abstract principles with which we conservatives often tend to define America’s founding and its public life. Our political arrangements have always been a compromise between such principles and the complex, relational character of the free human person. As James Stoner argues:

To be true to the spirit of the Declaration means, from my perspective, not that we are bound to the most radical reading of its most abstract truth, but that we ought to recover the spirited aspiration to self-government that gave the American Revolution its force and its justification. Rather than look to an unelected judiciary for the formulation of our ideals—or to the liberal philosophers who want to rule through them—we should neither shy away from free debate on important social questions nor demand that every consensus work out its derivation from first things in order to count.

It took a French Catholic priest, Father Raymond-Leopold Bruckberger (chaplain to the French Resistance in World War II) to reveal America to itself, or to remind America that its legacy begins with men locked in dry political argument. Bruckberger’s book Image of America (published in America in 1959) beautifully accounts for our Declaration of Independence and its mixture of natural theology (in its second paragraph) with the providential God (featured in the last section). Bruckberger observes that the Continental Congress, while not rejecting Jefferson’s deistic formulation of “Nature’s God” in the document’s opening, inserts toward the end two descriptions of God as a creator and judge, as a personal God.

The truth is, Bruckberger observes, “that Congress and Jefferson had different concepts of God” and that they held to “two profoundly different philosophies.” Jefferson and the reigning Lockean philosophy of the day held to an impersonal, past-tense God, more of a “what” than a “who.” But the fundamentally Christian (and specifically Calvinist, more often than not) members of Congress thought of God as a personal, present-tense, relational “who.” It is the Christian contribution to the founding compromise that made the God of nature personal, judgmental, relational, and providential (and so loving).

The living, giving God of the Bible is what secures, more than Jefferson’s Lockean contributions, our faith in the irreducible personal significance of each one of us. Without that faith, there would
be no accounting fully for Lincoln’s claim that America is, more than anything else, all about dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal. Without it, we would find it all too easy to account for the contradiction between Jefferson’s moving words about the ways our race-based slavery did violence to men and women with rights and his indifference to taking even modest risks to bring American slavery to a timely end. Living under the God who cares for us all is the foundation of a multidimensional, relational country in which men and women are more than citizens but citizens still. On many levels they are called to freely care for one another as well as to respect each person’s freedom as a being made in the image of God.

“The greatest luck of all for the Declaration,” Bruckberger claims, “was precisely the divergence and compromise between the Puritan tradition and what Jefferson wrote.” The Declaration cast in a strictly Puritan mold would have produced theocratic offenses against our true freedom as citizens and creatures. Alternatively, “[h]ad it been written from the standpoint of the lax philosophy of the day it would have been a-religious, if not actually offensive to Christians.” From a genuinely American point of view, understanding free persons as only un-relational bearers of rights—or as producers and consumers or free individuals and nothing more—really is a “lax philosophy” that reduces each of us to less than what we are.

The Declaration, by combining these views about who each of us is, provides the “philosophy that most manifests the equality of all men in their natural and supernatural dignity,” Bruckberger concludes. It is a document at the foundation of a tradition that truthfully relies on appeals to both Lockean and Christian understandings of who we are as free and equal beings, reconciling individual freedom with political and religious devotion and personal sacrifice on behalf of our fellow citizens and creatures.

We can say, as John Courtney Murray did in the spirit of Brownson, that the Founders built “better than they knew.” They were statesmen who did not think as abstract theorists, choosing instead to engage in prudential compromise in the interest of national unity. Jefferson, for example, thought the congress’s amendments to his Declaration mangled its intention, but he accommodated them with dignity. Such statesmanship reconciled universality and particularity on multiple levels. The universalism of Jefferson was from one view too abstract and from another too particular and selfish. The egalitarian theological universalism of the Puritans was too intrusively personal, and so it
ridiculously and tyrannically clamped down on the particular person's freedom. But it was also personal and relational, and so it affirmed the unique irreplaceability of every particular creature.

There is no direct matrix of translation from the founding insight concerning equal personal and relational liberty under God to concrete policy realms. But that insight does suggest that the spirit of prudential compromise ought to pervade our deliberations regarding the family, entitlements, abortion, religious liberty, taxation, and regulation, and our efforts to reconcile citizenship and civic spirit with the globalizing imperatives of the marketplace. Today's factional divisions are not so different from those of the founding generation, and we might even say that a true conservative both instinctively and prudentially searches for the mean between fundamentalism and libertarianism—or even between liberalism and libertarianism. The goal must be always to do justice to the full and complicated truth about who we are.

“Civilization,” as Murray’s fellow Catholic scholar Thomas Gilby put it, “is formed by men locked together in argument.” Our Declaration and Constitution, properly understood, sustain “the deliberate sense of the community” as a body capable of self-government, open to the truth about who each of us is, and glorying in its inheritance of the multifaceted and genuinely providential Western constitutional tradition given to America. As Solzhenitsyn memorably reminded us, our hopes for political and technological progress are both chastened and directed by the enduring truth that the one true human progress is made over the course of each particular human life toward a kind of personal and relational perfection in wisdom and virtue—progress that comes through responsibly and courageously and lovingly acting in light of what we cannot help but know about who we are. From this view, the unprecedented challenges to—as well as opportunities for—living as purposeful beings found in our technological world should be understood as gifts to be used well or badly according to our free wills. The challenges of our time are especially confusing because they so readily detach us from our traditional and relational institutions and sources of guidance. The first step toward making sense of them—toward finding our true place in the world—is recovering through deliberation and, often, compromise the truth about who each of us is as a free and relational person.