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Self-Government, Political Economy, and the Christian Tradition

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Abstract
This paper develops a theory of self-government that is specifically Christian, contrasted with both the liberal Enlightenment conception of self-government and other ways the term is commonly used. After defining and contrasting this Christian view of self-government, we explore how different schools of thought in social science can further our understanding of this conception, looking deeply at classical public choice in the Virginia school, behavioral public choice, and new institutional economics, specifically in the tradition of the Bloomington school. We discuss how these traditions reveal inherent incompatibilities between the liberal democratic view of self-government and the Christian view, but also how insights from these fields might lead us to more effective self-governance strategies.

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Self-denial is the test and definition of self-government.
—G. K. Chesterton

I. Introduction

Christian political thought has a long, contentious history as it relates to self-government. Questions like "What type of government shall we have?" "How do we keep the government from becoming tyrannical?" and "What shall be the citizen's role in his own governance?" have occupied the minds of Christian writers as much as or more than they have the writers of any other tradition. This paper explores the Christian and specifically Catholic contribution to the discussion of self-government. What is self-government and why should we desire it? What is the relationship between self-government and property? What does Church authority have to do

with self-government, and what does the Church have to say about the proper role of secular governance in promoting or limiting self-government?

Our contribution extends to connecting Christian thought on self-governance to the Enlightenment or liberal conception of self-government. As economists we are particularly interested in potential conflict with or overlap in the Christian conception of self-government and modern thinkers working in public choice, constitutional political economy, behavioral political economy, and new institutional economics. What insights does modern social science give us into the Christian view of self-government?

Section 2 explores the evolving Christian conception of self-government and its relationship to alternative conceptions. Section 3 discusses the relationship between Catholic social teaching and self-government in the modern era, with emphasis on guidance for secular governance and the role of private property. Section 4 discusses the relationship between property ownership and self-government in the Christian tradition.

II. On Self-Government, Christian and Otherwise

Self-government is a defining characteristic of Western liberal political philosophy. What then is self-government and why should we desire it? Rousseau attempts to answer these questions: "The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before" ([1762] 2009, location 212). At the individual level it is the political recognition of free individuals to the rights of self-reliance and self-determination. Collectively it is the ability for communities to solve their problems without outside interference.

The institutional setting of self-government draws its authority from the individuals who initiate its existence. Individuals within a self-governing society must possess a self-reliant disposition that limits the institutional government to a domain outside what local self-governance can accomplish. The interplay between self-governing individuals and restrained institutional government creates a web of interdependencies informed by the will of its individual members. Without these qualities, alternative institutional settings may produce tragic results: "Where self-government does not exist, the people are always exposed to the danger that the end of

government is lost sight of, and that governments assume themselves as their own ends," writes Lieber (1883, p. 253). The features of self-governing societies produce protections for the individual and his liberty.

A. Characteristics of Self-Government

At its core, the concept of self-government emerges from the idea of autonomy,[1] an individual's ability to independently and authentically define oneself (Jelen 2017). Self-government requires freedom from undesired coercion such that individuals are free to choose those things by which they may self-define (Buchanan 1979, p. 112). As an extension, collective self-government features institutions that allow for self-definition in ways that do not cause social unrest (De Tocqueville [1835] 2003). The encounters of autonomous individuals within institutional government allow for the emergence of the sympathies necessary for well-functioning government. As a result, the competing freedoms become tempered in a manner that reduces the occurrence of conflict due to competing individual and collective passions.

The Christian understanding of self-government also emerges from the tradition of autonomy. The difference between Christian and secular conceptions of self-governance comes from the foundational assumptions about the self and reality. The fundamental aspect of the Christian understanding of reality is that God is the omnipotent Creator of all and that humanity is created in His image. From this understanding flows the Christian conceptions of autonomy and self. While secular autonomy focuses on the expression of the self and the authority of state agency via collective expression and consent, Christian autonomy focuses on the personal acceptance of desire for a covenantal relationship with God. Through this relationship, humanity in its individual and collective capacities (and the entirety of creation) realizes its autonomy:

> If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the

[1] Lieber (1891, pp. 38, 247) notes that the term "self-government" emerged as a literal translation of the Greek word for autonomy.

> Creator. For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order (Paul VI 1965, sec. 36).

The Christian self reaches fulfillment in relation to God. God created humanity in His image, and this is the source of human dignity (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, sec. 356). Because God created humanity to love and serve Him, humanity cannot express true individuality outside of its relationship with God or others (John Paul II 1995, sec. 35).

To join the covenantal relationship between God and man, Christians must seek objective truth made available to human reason by God. In the Roman Catholic tradition, this intelligible version of the truth is known as natural law. Natural law "expresses and lays down the purposes, rights and duties which are based upon the bodily and spiritual nature of the human person. Therefore this law cannot be thought of as simply a set of norms on the biological level; rather it must be defined as the rational order whereby man is called by the Creator to direct and regulate his life and actions and in particular to make use of his own body" (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, introduction, sec. 3). Using human reason, we may apply the truth revealed through natural law in ways that free us from the entanglements of base desires (Catechism 1994, sec. 1954). In this way, Christian self-governance encounters the virtues, such as temperance and prudence.[2] For Christians, self-discipline is

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[2] (Catechism 1994, sec. 1806): "Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; 'the prudent man looks where he is going.' 'Keep sane and sober for your prayers.' Prudence is 'right reason in action,' writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid."

Aquinas ([1274] 1947, I, 22.1) argues that prudence is the virtue of self-government as it relates to the providence of God: "Now it belongs to prudence, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. vi, 12), to direct other things towards an end whether in regard to oneself—as for instance, a man is said to be prudent, who orders well his acts towards the end of life—or in regard to others subject to him, in a family, city or kingdom; in which sense it is said (Matthew 24:45), "a faithful and wise servant,

not simply a part of the expression of sympathy with other individuals in a social group. It is an essential part of the Christian definition of freedom. Christians must be free of moral impediments as much as they must be free of undesired influences that shape character:

> The human person cannot and must not be manipulated by social, economic or political structures, because every person has the freedom to direct himself towards his ultimate end. On the other hand, every cultural, social, economic and political accomplishment, in which the social nature of the person and his activity of transforming the universe are brought about in history, must always be considered also in the context of its relative and provisional reality, because "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31). (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, sec. 48)

In the exercise of their freedom, Christians do not become independent of God. Humanity is not free to determine good and evil for itself and must still submit to the universal law created by God (John Paul II 1993, sec. 35). It is in this submission that humanity finds its freedom.

Just as there are many denominations of Christianity, there are many foundations for ethics, definitions for the self, and understandings of reality. For example, the main denominations to emerge out of the Reformation, Lutheranism and the Reformed, reject natural law with few caveats. The rejection of the authority of tradition and human reason in addition to the acceptance of the authority of scripture led the Protestant denominations to place the foundation of ethical thinking within the holy scripture, restricting access to right thinking to members of their congregations.[3] To

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whom his lord hath appointed over his family." In this way prudence or providence may suitably be attributed to God. For in God Himself there can be nothing ordered towards an end, since He is the last end. This type of order in things towards an end is therefore in God called providence."

[3] To the extent that Calvin accepted natural law, he believed it served a negative purpose: to expose the total depravity of man. It did not serve as a common bond among all humanity: "If the original creation, including the imago dei, is thought to be totally destroyed or depraved, this leads to a kind of Protestant pessimism that places all ethics within the order of redemption and the new creation. This partly accounts for the fact that Protestant ethics has tended to be purely personalistic and voluntaristic, relying on discrete commands announced by God now and then, in this situation or that. Protestant ethics shows a marked tendency to fall into pure

examine their arguments and the foundations of their beliefs would go beyond the scope of this work.

B. Relationship to Liberalism

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

—J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 10

As we have shown, the Christian conception of self-government does not put aside the social aspect of the individual. It is through the various interdependencies within which individuals find themselves that the Christian realizes the responsibilities necessary to make freedom fulfilling. These responsibilities place demands on both the individual and society to work for the common good. The Church defines the common good as "the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection" (Paul VI 1965, sec. 74). For today's liberal status quo, self-government has come to be synonymous with self-determination and individualism. Dependence on others and, necessarily, unchosen obligations toward others are not compatible with a completely liberal worldview. But as Catherine Pakuluk (2016) writes, "in a society founded on a constitution of liberty of dependence, one should find a doctrine of dependence as constitutive of the 'essential goodness' of society."

God exists in a hypostatic union of three persons; His nature is relational. Therefore, because humanity is made in His image, we also are relational beings. The liberal focus on individualism strains the Christian conception of human nature. Within the Christian context, liberalism has led to the abrogation of unchosen obligation. Christianity views such things as the liberalization of divorce laws, abortion permissiveness, the availability of pornography, substance use and abuse, and the increased reliance on the state over alternative social institutions as consequences of the breakdown of breakdown of societal obligations. While this type of state involvement might expand the range of personal choice, it cripples self-government in

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occasionalism, actualism, and situationism. The fundamental givens are either denied altogether or ignored, so that the ethical decision is made existentially in each moment and each situation. With the loss of general rules and enduring principles, it is difficult to find a bridge to the public orders of life in which Christians and non-Christians can work side by side" (Braaten 1992).

the Christian sense, which is based on the interdependency of the individual, family, and community.[4] The ruptures in social bonds and constraints displayed in the examples above appear like what is observed in scripture after the entrance of sin into the Church's understanding of human history:

> No one wishing to investigate the mystery of sin can ignore this link between cause and effect. As a rupture with God, sin is an act of disobedience by a creature who rejects, at least implicitly, the very one from whom he came and who sustains him in life. It is therefore a suicidal act. Since by sinning man refuses to submit to God, his internal balance is also destroyed and it is precisely within himself that contradictions and conflicts arise. Wounded in this way, man almost inevitably causes damage to the fabric of his relationship with others and with the created world. This is an objective law and an objective reality, verified in so many ways in the human psyche and in the spiritual life as well as in society, where it is easy to see the signs and effects of internal disorder. (John Paul II 1984, sec. 15)

In as far as the results of liberalism resemble sin, they resemble a kind of social sin. Social sin is that which violates the autonomy and rights of others made intelligible through natural law. Through social sin,

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[4] John Paul II (1995, sec. 19–20) states: "When freedom, out of a desire to emancipate itself from all forms of tradition and authority, shuts out even the most obvious evidence of an objective and universal truth, which is the foundation of personal and social life, then the person ends up by no longer taking as the sole and indisputable point of reference for his own choices the truth about good and evil, but only his subjective and changeable opinion or, indeed, his selfish interest and whim.

"This view of freedom leads to a serious distortion of life in society. If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself. Thus society becomes a mass of individuals placed side by side, but without any mutual bonds. Each one wishes to assert himself independently of the other and in fact intends to make his own interests prevail. Still, in the face of other people's analogous interests, some kind of compromise must be found, if one wants a society in which the maximum possible freedom is guaranteed to each individual. In this way, any reference to common values and to a truth absolutely binding on everyone is lost, and social life ventures on to the shifting sands of complete relativism. At that point, everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining: even the first of the fundamental rights, the right to life."

humanity works against the common good and breaks the bonds with both neighbor and God, ultimately making Christian self-government impossible (John Paul II 1984, sec. 16).

Pakuluk shows some optimism, however, for a synthesis or alliance between classical liberal and Christian views on self-government rooted in natural law and the work of liberal economist F. A. Hayek. She writes: "Such a friendship would be based in a shared concept that there are laws governing human affairs that we have no possibility of changing without suffering peril."

III. Political Economy and Christian Self-Government

Having clarified the nature and meaning of self-government in the preceding section, we turn our attention to how secular and ecclesial government affect self-government in its Christian conception. To do this we will explore several approaches to the social science of government to see what insights can be gained for the promotion of self-government.

A. Classical Public Choice: Contractarian and Constitutionalism

The groundbreaking economic work of Buchanan and Tullock (1965) called on those studying collective action to abandon their idealistic notions of governance, or as Buchanan (1999, pp. 45–59) said, to study politics *without romance*). Their project was about applying the economic way of thinking to issues of public governance. This means treating both voters and politicians as being motivated by self-interest in the same way that economists describe agents in the marketplace.

Of particular interest to us is Buchanan's work on constitutional political economy as a way to resolve questions about how a democratic polity can be self-governing in the sense of *self-restraining*. Buchanan rejected the idea that the simple act of voting in a liberal democracy was a meaningful form of self-government. However, he proposed a level of analysis that precedes policy decisions. This constitutional level of analysis is the period where people decide upon and agree to be limited by constraints. These constraints shape they types of policies that may be enacted at the lower levels of decision making.

The key for Buchanan was that the constitutional level takes place behind a veil of ignorance: Those involved in the process of choosing constraints are unaware of their position in society and thus do not know if they will benefit from a particular constitutional design. Therefore, they will attempt to choose the constraints that benefit a

majority of society. This differs from deliberations at the policy level where those engaged in the process know or at least strongly suspect whether they will benefit or lose due to a specific policy. Buchanan's work focuses on the constitutional level of analysis in order to ensure a level of fairness at the policy level.

Buchanan's conception of self-government is in line with the Christian tradition. On the policy level, he argues that the government will be completely unrestrained: politicians, seeking reelection, will appeal to the short-term interests of voters, who will reward politicians for this behavior. Of course, this short-term thinking will eventually lead to bad outcomes, and may leave confused voters scratching their heads. How could bad outcomes result from us getting exactly what we asked for?

Buchanan's favored remedy, which constitutes the bulk of his later academic work, is to focus on meta-rules that can restrain political behavior. The deliberation on meta-rules cannot take place at the policy level since people know whether they expect to win or lose at that level. At the constitutional level, he argues, polities can form optimal rules that restrain the government from pursuing harmful—if temporarily popular—policies. For instance, a balanced budget amendment could be agreed upon at the constitutional level but not at the policy level because of majority support of a given spending program to vote against cuts. Ultimately, the constitutional restraints lead to more freedom as citizens are no longer chained to a constantly growing leviathan state.

The parallel with sin is strong. Without self-imposed restraints, humanity is apt to choose sin, which may seem like the more expedient path. If the restrictions are purely self-imposed, we may find excuses to loosen or adjust the rules. To truly escape sin, believers must give over their will to God. Believers are not free to live as they ought unless they are restrained from following the passions that may lead them astray or place burdens upon the communities in which they live. In this way, Buchanan is working directly in the Christian tradition of self-governance.

B. Behavioral Political Economy

Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.
—Proverbs 25:28

Building off the work in behavioral economics and political science, especially by Bryan Caplan (2007), we argue that if the aim of a people is effective self-government, the institutions of liberal democracy should theoretically, and do typically, lead to outcomes that would *not* be desired by a rational, instrumental, self-interested polity. The voting mechanism encourages a self-interested approach to voting, which leads to extremely low levels of voter knowledge, engagement, and critical analysis of policy; instead, voters choose policies that satisfy their biases, acting on extremely low levels of information, and do not individually pay the costs of their actions.

Another way of stating the problem is this: if voters mostly had self-interested motivations and rational cognition, there still might be several problems with democratic governance. But if they have irrational cognition (no matter their motivation), we shouldn't expect that they're even trying to make democracy "work," that is, deliver good outcomes. Contrast this with earlier work in classical public choice, which blames policy failure on ineffective constitutional rules or regulatory and institutional capture by so-called special interests.

What does rationality have to do with self-government? If Caplan is correct and we are to consider democratic governance where voting is the main way we expect citizens to participate in government, we should not expect that type of self-governance to be particularly effective in delivering good social outcomes. From a Christian perspective, democratic governance as practiced in most of the world does not discipline believers to be self-governing agents in covenant with God but encourages human vice: selfishly neglecting to attend to matters of public interest, like becoming informed and rationally evaluating policies, in favor of indulging in biases. Participation in public life, a vital aspect of democracy, is also a vital part of the human experience. To fully participate, people "must be informed, listened to and involved in the exercise of the carried-out functions (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, sec. 190)." The unwillingness or inability of those participating in the democratic process to obtain the necessary information produces a situation that

may gravely work against the common good (John Paul II 1991, sec. 46–47).[5]

Another related theory advanced by Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, "expressive voting" (1993), states that much of a voter's value from voting comes from expressing a particular point of view, divorced from any policy outcomes that might arise. For instance, a voter might support increases in the minimum wage not because he has sufficient reason to believe such increases will definitely benefit the poor, but because voting in that manner expresses concern for the poor and affiliation with others who vote in similar ways. Both Caplan's view and the expressive voting literature are, like the rational ignorance literature from public choice, rooted in the low probability of an individual voter casting a decisive vote.

If self-government means citizens are permitted to vote for whomever and whichever policies they wish, this behavioral literature has no bearing on whether liberal democracy is an effective way to pursue self-government. In this view of self-government, one is forced to conclude, with H. L. Mencken (1981, p. 19), that "Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard." But a Christian view of self-government would say that a polity which makes decisions democratically is anything but self-governing. Rather than seeking truth and being oriented toward the common good, voters are slaves to their biases and whims, indulging in a selfish pattern of behavior that is, as we should expect, ultimately destructive to the life of that polity.

Caplan is critical of Buchanan's constitutional project. The same forces, he claims, that generate policy in the everyday version of politics will necessarily be the forces that lead to constitutional design and reform. There is support for this view in many real-life constitutions: Magna Carta, for instance, is essentially a list of privileges locked in by nobles and Londoners, giving them power over the king at a time when the monarchy was weak. When the king returned to a position of strength, many clauses of the Magna Carta were abrogated. Even more convincingly, the actual text of constitutions can be reinterpreted over time to suit the desires of a changing polity. In the United States, for instance, the Supreme Court routinely reinterprets clauses of the Constitution, and the way

[5] "Participation without an understanding of the situation of the political community, the facts and the proposed solutions to problems is unthinkable" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, sec. 414).

justices vote is highly predictable by their political ideology. It is clear that if constitutional rules are meaningful, they are meaningful in a way highly separate from the written word: meaning arises contextually and organically within the citizenry.

C. New Institutional Economics and the Bloomington School

Public choice economics is known as a cynical field, and certainly most public choice research can sour even the most optimistic fan of democracy on the entire idea of communal self-rule. But an optimistic area of political economy research for advancing the Christian view of self-government can be found in the work of Elinor Ostrom and other social scientists in her tradition, called the Bloomington school (after Bloomington, Indiana, where Ostrom taught). Ostrom's work seeks to explain how individuals living in community have overcome practical obstacles to manage their common resources, providing a model for self-government in community life that is consistent with the Christian view.

Ostrom's empirical and theoretical work focused on a "third way" outside the state and private property to communally manage common pool resources in a sustainable fashion (Bergstrom 2010). In the 1980s, Professor Ostrom traveled to Torbel, Switzerland, to study the region's system of irrigation canals (1990). She observed that while no one owned these canals—a group of farmers met to establish community standards—nearby residents were able to use them in exchange for putting in a few days of maintenance work per year. There was no state oversight, although the community imposed access penalties on those who abused the common resource. Ostrom researched similar arrangements around the world in Japan, Spain, and the Philippines.

The self-governance structures studied by Ostrom fit very well with the Christian conception of self-government, showing community members developing institutions for managing and sharing resources from the bottom up. Communities taking responsibility for their resources and creating institutions to manage their resources in a manner proportionate to their needs accords with subsidiarity, a foundational idea in the social teaching of the Catholic Church (other Christian traditions contain similar ideas). The principle of subsidiarity is a proposition of positive and negative responsibilities between higher levels of association (such as a federal government) and lower levels of association (such as a municipal government). In practice, subsidiarity means that the higher-ordered

associations may not absorb the responsibilities of the lower-ordered associations and must actively promote the growth and flourishing of the lower levels (Compendium sec. 185).

The principle of subsidiarity shares some features with decentralization and federalism, but it is important to note the differences. The reason Ostrom's common pool resource management techniques succeed is not because a central authority has delegated or decentralized power to smaller units, but because individuals working in community have organically created institutions from the bottom up at a level that has most efficiently managed the resources. There is no way to tell *a priori* what level of decentralization or centralization is optimal.

Because there is no formula to determine the proper level of decentralization, the popular understanding of subsidiarity as maximum decentralization is deficient. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads, "a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good,"[6] with no strict definition as to the size of these communities. In her Nobel lecture "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," Ostrom emphasizes that multiple *complementary* levels of governance can exist. Polycentricity only connotes that the decision makers are formally independent of each other, but they typically form an "interdependent system of relations" (V. Ostrom 1961).

IV. On Civil Governance and Christian Self-Government

We now consider which forms of civil government are compatible with (or best nurture the idea of) Christian self-government. The Church declares no preference for political or economic systems (Paul VI 1967, sec. 13). However, the Church does demand that the chosen systems meet Catholic standards of justice (Leo XII 1885, sec. 5). The choice of system and the art of governance are left to the laity, which exist both as the Church and within secular society. The preceding section on research in modern political economy delivers some valuable insights about the choice of system. Clearly, public

[6] The catechism cites the papal encyclical Quadragesimo Anno for its definition of subsidiarity.

choice research indicates that liberal democracy, as practiced with voting being the primary method of civic engagement, faces severe limitations in its ability to foster and support a Christian conception of self-government.

What alternatives are there to liberal democracy? To answer this question, we must first consider briefly the Church's understanding of the anthropology of political authority. For Christians, all of creation is ordered in such a way that it collectively portrays the beauty of God (Aquinas [1273] 1947, I, 102). The beauty of God also is portrayed within human society when it focuses on the common good, which finds its source within God, who is the source of all good.[7] It follows that political authority flows from God to a society, as no individual possesses the authority or ability to restrain society toward the common good (Waldstein 2014). God alone possesses such coercive power. Because authority originates in the divine, those who wield earthly authority, and the laws that govern society, are due respect and obedience. Understanding this background and the view that modernity has cleaved authority from the divine removes some of the mystery as to why liberal democracy never enjoyed much support in Christian philosophy despite its ascendancy.

A. Catholic Political Economy and the Desirability of Specific Political Systems

Through most of history in Christian civilization, the dominant form of government has been some variety of monarchy or autocracy. Theologians have found value in monarchies as long as they are oriented toward the common good. Aquinas ([1267] 1949) states three main reasons for the superiority of monarchies. First, he posits that it is easier for a single ruler to maintain order and unity than for a multitude to do so (I, 3, xvii–xix). Next, he states that it is harder to build consensus among several rulers relative to the natural consensus that comes from unitary rule. Finally, he argues that monarchy is more natural because God reigns as the unitary ruler over nature, and society (and humanity) are both part of nature.

While Aquinas shows that support exists for monarchical governments, there is limited support for autocratic governments within Catholic political philosophy. Absolute dictatorships suffer from many of the same problems as democracy. Aquinas ([1267] 1949, I, 4, xxiii) recognizes that because the autocrat need not pay

[7] Aquinas states, "The common good of many is more Godlike than the good of an individual ([1274] 1947, II–II, 31, iii, ad. 2.)

attention to the common good, the ruler may oppress the populace and divert resources to the detriment of society. In similar fashion, Gordon Tullock (1987) gives a thorough treatment of autocratic regimes from a public choice perspective. Like leaders in a democratic regime, autocrats are very restricted in the kinds of policies they can support because they have to spend so many resources preventing their own overthrow. At the same time, while the people living under such a regime have no ability to influence the it (Tullock shows most popular uprisings to be thinly veiled competitions between elites), self-government might still be happening at lower levels.

Complete changes to governmental structures and technologies are a drastic step that may cost more than the upheaval is worth. It may be more pertinent to focus on how to bring existing institutions and governance models into accordance with Church teachings on justice and promotion of the common good. The most fruitful path forward is to focus on subsidiarity and decision making at low levels, rather than the national level. Church teaching places subsidiarity as an integral part of the social experience and a necessary aspect for cohesion and flourishing (Leo XII 1891, sec. 11). The need to focus on lower levels of association flows from the need to ensure respect for the dignity of individuals and families as the base units of society. Absorption of the responsibilities of the lower levels of association threatens well-being in these units because the loss of governing responsibilities reduces the necessity and fruitfulness of association (John Paul II 1991, sec. 48). Furthermore, higher levels of government may not be able to fully understand the local populace's issues and needs. The inability for bureaucratic institutions to grasp the local knowledge necessary to make proper decisions and interventions is well-known in economics and political science (Hayek 1945).

Along with Elinor Ostrom, many other researchers show how subsidiarity has proven important for the development and maintenance of modern society. Young (2017) provides a convincing take on how constitutional development of the medieval city, nestled among the various autocratic regimes of the medieval period, provided the right institutional environment for an ethical and rhetorical change that eventually led to the economic growth of the industrial era. Salter (2015) explains that "rather than be subsumed under a constitutional authority, the cities comprising the Hanseatic League exhibited a polycentric governance structure, which required

governance arrangements to be self-enforcing." Some more recent examples emerged out of disaster recovery in the United States. Within the broader literature, Coyne and Lemke (2012) argue that polycentricity allows disaster response to incorporate dispersed local knowledge in order to administer appropriate remedies in the appropriate scales. At issue is determining how decision making is to occur across a polycentric order. To that end, Marshall (2015) documents the literature identifying the principle of subsidiarity as the key element in defining the dispersal of decision making in a polycentric order.

Defining and instituting subsidiarity is not without its struggles. Cahill (2017), in examining the European understanding of subsidiarity, acknowledges that the principle has become unmoored from its purpose due to the principle being disassociated with providing good governance (p. 205). Subsidiarity became a problem to be solved technocratically making it extremely difficult to define what is meant by the higher and lower levels of association or why affirming the authority of the lower levels is logical (Cahill 2017, p. 207). However, once the issue of providing the theoretical support for subsidiarity is properly resolved, polities must deal with the issue of participation.

The Church recognizes participation as one of the chief aspirations of the person living within a democratic polity (Paul VI 1971, sec. 24). It is through participation in the various associations of life as well as the political system that the person primarily contributes to a culture and society. Members of a society have a duty to participate in the processes of government as part of their responsibility to each other and to the common good. The necessity and importance of participation to the person and society also places an onus on the government to ensure the opportunity to participate as well as the information and edification necessary to participate well (John Paul II 1991, sec. 46). Burbidge (2017) recognizes the issues of participation and subsidiarity by acknowledging the politics involved with subsidiarity. While the lower levels of association involve the primary actors for decision making, subsidiarity is often assumed and initiated by the higher levels in a top-down approach, removing the responsibility and choice from those with whom the choices and responsibilities should exist (Burbidge 2017, p. 147). To counteract such thought, participation ought to be considered the act of performing subsidiarity (Burbidge 2017, p. 149).

Assurance of the opportunity to participate is a vital part of respect for the dignity of the person. Participating with others displays a certain type of interdependence while also acknowledging the equality of persons, at least in dignity. The interdependence, unity, and equality in dignity are expressions of the principle of solidarity (John Paul II, sec. 38–39). Through solidarity, the unique value of each person is affirmed while the common ties that bind and indebt one to another are acknowledged. Paying consideration to the principle of solidarity requires more consideration of issues of participation. Acute instances of offenses to participation, such as gerrymandering, come easily. Solidarity causes us to question the systemic issues.

B. Distributism: A Fruitful Path Forward or Distraction?

The Communist and the Capitalist will discuss whether the individual worker is well paid, whether he is well treated, whether he works under good or bad conditions, whether he is dependent on a good or bad business or a good or bad government; but NOT whether he is independent.
—G. K. Chesterton

One of the systemic issues at risk of violating the principle of solidarity is the inequality of influence created by economic conditions. The dignity of persons may be offended when, due to the lack of resources, a person's participation in civic life is prevented or ignored. Arguably, the lack of recognition due to lack of economic means is at the heart of modern discussions of disenfranchisement and intergenerational poverty. Church teaching states that when such situations of inequality exist, it is the duty of those who possess more resources to care for those who lack an equal voice (John Paul II 1987, sec. 39). Distributism emerged as a theoretical solution to this issue.

Distributism is difficult to define as a cohesive philosophy, as it is relatively unsystematic. It emerged as a response to the social upheaval of industrialization and the moral bankruptcy of socialism (McDaniel 2006, p. 519). Its most familiar aspect is as an economic ideology that seeks to make the world's productive assets as widely owned as possible. Distributism originated with the work of Chesterton and Belloc, Catholic writers interested in defining a "third way," an alternative to capitalism and socialism, both condemned by Church social teaching. More generally, distributism was an attempt to reapply the tenants of Catholic social thought to the post-

nineteenth-century world. Chesterton believed that the wide distribution of property would empower the sleeping working class to reengage society and assert the values that had gone dormant (McDaniel 2006, p. 519).

Proponents of distributism offer little in terms of a concrete plan for moving forward, possibly because distributism is as much a moral movement as a technical one (McDaniel 2006, p. 520). Some of the proposed antidotes to modern capitalist society are the return to medieval guild economies; a focus on small, local businesses; and the abolition of banks to end arguably usurious practices.[8] However, there is no technical discussion of how these changes will occur or what consequences might emerge. Recent work by Callahan and Salter (2018) has tried to separate what clearly will not work in distributism (wage and price controls, for instance, which economic science has thoroughly shown to be ineffective) with what is promising: focusing on dismantling centralizing power structures that rely on state power. Such a dismantling will lead to a more widespread distribution of property ownership, a necessary condition for engaging people in their communities.[9]

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[8] George O'Brien (1920, p. 99) describes the issue like this: "The scholastic teaching, then, on the subject was quite plain and unambiguous. Usury, or the payment of a price for the use of a sum lent in addition to the repayment of the sum itself, was in all cases prohibited. The fact that the payment demanded was moderate was irrelevant; there could be no question of the reasonableness of the amount of an essentially unjust payment. Nor was the payment of usury rendered just because the loan was for a productive purpose—in other words, a commercial loan. Certain writers have maintained that in this case usury was tolerated; but they can easily be refuted. As we have seen above, mutuum was essentially a sale, and, therefore, no additional price could be charged because of some special individual advantage enjoyed by the buyer (or borrower). It was quite impossible to distinguish, according to the scholastic teaching, between taking an additional payment because the lender made a profit by using the loan wisely, and taking it because the borrower was in great distress, and therefore derived a greater advantage from the loan than a person in easier circumstances. The erroneous notion that loans for productive purposes were entitled to any special treatment was finally dispelled in 1745 by an encyclical of Benedict XIV." The issue is arguable due to the large number of interpretations of the tradition of usury and its potential development (Woodyard and Marzen 2012).

[9] McDaniel (2006) discusses the congruences and divergences between Hayekian political economy and Chestertonian distributism. Anecdotally, Catholic theologian Benjamin Wiker states that he discovered Belloc and distributism through his reading of Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, within which Hayek quotes approvingly from Belloc's *The Servile State*. Corrin (1988) argues from a reading of Friedrich Hayek and Wilhem Röpke as "neo-distributists." Thomas Storck, a modern

V. Conclusion

We have argued that self-government in a Christian conception must be more than simple autonomy: if the individuals in a community are not in some way oriented toward a common good, they cannot be self-governing. While constitutions might be an important way for communities to limit government authority, the problem of self-government cannot be fixed by a clever application of constitutional rules. And we should certainly not expect increased voter participation to lead to meaningful self-government: instead, we should expect the institution of voting to deliver predictably poor outcomes. Unfortunately, the political system of most Western countries is designed to bring out the worst in humans: apathetic disregard for community, indulgence in bias and ignorance, and public life as an elaborate status signaling game.

Elinor Ostrom (2010) wrote, "A core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans." This statement is very much in line with Christian social teaching. For Christians, the conditions for self-government are based on the principles of subsidiarity and polycentricity that lead people to engage in the problems of managing their communities. Owning property and having skin in the game (that is, a stake in the success of the community's resource management) are necessary preconditions for being engaged in community life. By being engaged in community management, community members become self-governing. For the government to be restrained, that government must grow organically from the self-restrained and self-governed behavior of its citizens. There is no other way.

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defender of distributism, certainly would take issue with this view: "If ecclesiastical authority were as vigilant today about suppressing heresy and dissent as it was in 1910 or 1950, the Catholic Austrians would either have to shut up or leave the Church. But, alas, such is not the case, and they continue with their career of deception and misinformation to the hurt of not a few Catholics (2010, p. 42)."

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