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The Damned Neighbors Problem: Rousseau's Civil Religion Revisited

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Abstract: Near the conclusion of *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau starkly proclaims that no state has been founded without a religious basis, and thus if he is right, every political community must grapple with the tension between the conflicting claims of the divine and the mundane. Because Christianity cannot solve this tension, Rousseau calls for a new religion, a civil religion. Whereas most of the academic treatment of civil religion follows various paths beginning with Robert Bellah's original 1967 article, this essay explores more deeply the contours of Rousseau's original articulation of the problem to which civil religion is his proposed solution. The essay concludes by suggesting that we can find important elements of Rousseau's approach still alive and well in American politics and culture today.

Keywords: civil religion; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; tolerance; social cohesion; Christianity; religion and politics

1. Introduction

The academic treatment of civil religion as a cultural and religious phenomenon began with Robert Bellah's 1967 *Daedalus* article, "Civil Religion in America" and continued in earnest for some time as sociologists, political scientists, historians, theologians, and religious studies scholars joined the discussion, some attempting to frame the subject descriptively and others evaluating it—whatever "it" is—normatively, politically, and theologically. That discussion ebbed and flowed, though it has been revived recently by the remarkable *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* by one of Bellah's students, Philip Gorski.[1]

While Bellah's article created a new academic subgenre, civil religion scholars have long noted that the term itself comes from the Genevan political philosopher and eccentric polymath Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). The eighth chapter of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* is entitled "On Civil Religion" and addresses the tangled tensions, conflicts, and at times codependency of politics and religion.[2] Moreover, whereas the modern academic literature began in 1967, and the term was coined in 1762, that religiopolitical reality that Rousseau grappled with and today's academics attempt to describe is at least as old as Socrates, condemned by the state for corrupting the youth and introducing new gods to the city.

While most scholars acknowledge Rousseau's introducing the term and sometimes mention his criticism of Christianity, there is more to Rousseau's conception of civil religion than a quick perusal of

[1] See (Bellah 1967; Gorski 2017).

[2] For *The Social Contract*, *Geneva Manuscript*, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, *Letter to Mirabeau*, and the *Discourse on Political Economy*, I use (Rousseau 2003). For the *Letter to Voltaire*, the *First Discourse*, and the *Second Discourse*, I use (Rousseau 1997). For Rousseau's *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, I use *Political Writings* (Rousseau 1953).

his eighth chapter would indicate. The body of literature that scholars have produced since Bellah is of enormous interest, and despite thorny definitional debates, we have learned a great deal about the concept of civil religion and its manifestation in American politics and religion since colonial days. While there is still a great deal of valuable work to be done building on these foundations, this essay goes the other direction by delving into Rousseau's original formulation. If Bellah is the father of civil religion studies, Rousseau might be considered the godfather. By reading his works more closely, we can find themes, questions, and claims about the conflict(s) between religion and politics that still resonate today.

The subject of this essay, then, is Rousseau's formulation of that conflict as well as his offered solution, a solution that goes far deeper than then oft-mentioned treatment near the conclusion of *The Social Contract*. This first section explores that treatment as well as his critique of Christianity. Here, Rousseau introduces the concept of civil religion not as a descriptive project but a normative one: it is meant to address the predicament of citizens facing two competing claims on their ultimate allegiance. In the second section, I describe another political rupture that Rousseau sought to mend: the division between rulers and ruled. The third section describes the closest we come in Rousseau's thought to a practical solution to the problems described in the first two sections. In his constitutional advice written for the citizens of Corsica and Poland, Rousseau offers concrete proposals as to how his vision might be realized, even if imperfectly. I draw upon these works to describe his strategy for creating a new civic entity capable of avoiding the toxic blending of the wrong sort of religion with the wrong sort of politics. While a consideration of Rousseau's strategy applied to modern politics lies beyond the scope of this essay, I conclude by suggesting Rousseau's insights and arguments remain relevant for those interested in the perennial question of civic identity and social cohesion in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society.

2. Christianity and the Damned Neighbors Problem

In June 1762, a judicial council in Paris banned Jean-Jacques Rousseau's master work on education, *Emile*, and called for his arrest. Rousseau fled France for Switzerland only to find a few days later that the city of Berne condemned *Emile* and its author, and the authorities in Geneva banned not only *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, but warned that their wayward son would be arrested if he ever returned to his birthplace.[3] The putative conflict between politics and religion was not a hypothetical or academic concern for Rousseau.

We find two tensions Rousseau addresses in many of his works. The first is familiar to his readers; it is the tension, writ large, of the individual citizen caught between appeals from his religion and his country. Rousseau holds that Christianity encourages this tension and the results bode ill for the state. Either the Christian citizen, an oxymoron for Rousseau, is too meek to care about or defend the earthly polis, or the Christian is so zealous for his particular faith and the faith of his less devout neighbors that he persecutes them. The other tension, addressed in the next section, is comprised of a division between the rulers and the ruled.

The eighth chapter of *The Social Contract* is entitled "Civil Religion," and here Rousseau describes why Christianity has been such a disaster for politics. Prior to Christianity, each political entity had its own gods and so there was little incentive to make war for religious reasons.[4] Whereas in the ancient world the pagan gods fought for men as portrayed in the *Iliad*, with Christianity men fight for God. Rousseau's political exemplars, Sparta and Rome, enjoyed a sort of spiritual and political unity that has been impossible since Christianity. Indeed, the very phrase "spiritual *and* political unity" is itself only feasible after the two qualifiers have been severed by Christianity. Rousseau explains:

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[3] This brief account draws from Maurice Cranston (1997, pp. 1–132).
[4] (Rousseau 2003, p. 144).

> It was in these circumstances that Jesus came to establish a Spiritual Kingdom on earth; which, by separating the theological from the political system, led to the State's ceasing to be one, and caused the intestine divisions which have never ceased to convulse Christian peoples.[5]

Pagans naturally suspected that the early Christians preached tolerance and meekness while they were weak, but would later change their tune after acquiring power and Rousseau voices exactly this concern that, "the humble Christians changed their language, and before long this supposedly other-worldly kingdom was seen to become under a visible chief the most violent despotism in the world."

Rousseau describes seven complaints about Christianity, and the modern reader can determine for herself how salient these criticisms were and remain.[6] The first is familiar and consists of a charge that Christians are intolerant and armed with a sure knowledge of the truth, convinced they are responsible for proselytizing their neighbors, by force if necessary. The second charge is that Christianity makes republican virtue impossible because it preaches a universal God who transcends boundaries, promotes an other-worldly attitude that neglects earthly politics, and produces milquetoast citizens who are made for slavery.[7] Third, Christianity cultivates a divided citizenry because it gives believers an authority that rivals the state and promises an afterlife in which any injustices suffered on earth are recompensed many times over. The fourth charge is that Christianity leads to a despotic clergy.

The fifth charge has a Nietzschean flavor to it: the weakening of morality. Christianity teaches the doctrine of original sin, which states that humanity is deeply flawed, yet it also demands moral perfection. Such a combination leads to despair and apathy, and apathetic and despairing citizens are of little use to the state. Rousseau's sixth charge follows the fifth closely: Christianity denigrates marriage and the family because it makes life miserable for women. Finally, Rousseau condemned Christianity for dividing the human soul because it does not allow man to return to the presocial simplicity given its doctrine of original sin, and because its antirepublican features make the social contract and a new healthier politics impossible.

It is worth noting that Rousseau's contemporary and fellow philosopher Voltaire, despite a rather love–hate relationship with Rousseau, could not help but compliment Rousseau's *Emile* as it contained "some forty pages against Christianity, some of the boldest that have ever been written."[8] The conclusion to *The Social Contract* was also bold in this regard, and one understands how Rousseau got himself into so much trouble publishing both books in his own name. Despite occasional good things to say about Christianity, Rousseau seems to presage Nietzsche's judgment that it is the "calamity of millennia."[9]

Yet there is a catch. Even though Christianity has been a disaster, religion is still necessary because Rousseau's survey of history leads him to declare: "No state has ever been founded without religion at its base."[10] Rousseau believes he must find an alternative religion if his reconceived polity will engender the cohesion necessary to support the political authority he finds in society's general will. Religion also plays an important role in creating beliefs and thus the mores that support the state. After all, in any "state that can require its members to sacrifice their lives," Rousseau writes, "anyone who does not believe in the afterlife is necessarily a coward or a madman."[11] Religion, despite its liabilities, can minimize undesirables and motivate citizens to do the right thing.

We have here a problem. Any cohesive society needs a kind of religion to act as a social glue and promote good behavior, yet Christianity not only cannot provide that glue but is the worst sort

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5 Ibid.
6 I follow here political philosopher Arthur Melzer (1996, pp. 345–46).
7 The charge of passivity, however, seems somewhat in tension with the first charge of a militant intolerance.
8 (Melzer 1996, p. 345), quoting Voltaire's letter to Damilaville, 14 June 1762.
9 (Nietzsche 1992, p. 689). *Ecce Homo*.
10 (Rousseau 2003, p. 146).
11 (Melzer 1996, p. 351).

of solvent for it. Rousseau credits Hobbes with pursuing the right solution in his opus *Leviathan*; that is, he reunites the political and the spiritual realms that Christianity severed by putting the head of state in charge of the church. Hobbes, however, attempted to transform Christianity and underestimated its potency. There is no redeeming the Christian faith for political purposes. Yet what are the alternatives? Rousseau describes three types of religion as candidates: a natural religion that corresponds with Rousseau's description of true gospel Christianity, a return to the ancient national religions that animated Sparta and Rome, and a "third, more bizarre sort of Religion which, by giving men two legislations, two chiefs, two fatherlands, subjects them to contradictory duties and prevents their being at once devout and Citizens." This third type sets up two authoritative orders, one civil and one ecclesial.

The first type of religion is meek Christianity, or religion of man, and it cannot solve the problem because its citizens are too concerned about the next world to make good citizens in this world. Regrettably for Rousseau, the ancient Greek and Roman pagan religions are no longer viable alternatives for two reasons: one, they relied on superstition and falsehood, and two, such societies tend to become overly bloodthirsty and thus risk their own security by being too willing to fight.[12]

The third type, what Rousseau calls the priest's religion, sets up two authoritative orders, one civil and one ecclesial, and is exemplified by Roman Catholicism and Japanese Shinto. Rousseau dismisses this third type without much comment other than he would waste his time denouncing this religion because "all institutions which put man in contradiction with himself are worthless." Rousseau offers his own solution, a fourth way.[13] There must be a civil profession of faith, authored by the sovereign, that defines who is a *bona fide* member of the body politic and who is *persona non grata*. Anyone not adhering to the profession can be justly banished, and anyone who professes and later reneges should be put to death for committing the gravest of sins, "lying before the law."[14] What, then, does Rousseau as civil theologian propose as the new creed of political faith?

> The dogmas of the civil religion must be simple and few in number, expressed precisely and without explanations or commentaries. The existence of an omnipotent, intelligent, benevolent divinity that foresees and provides; the life to come; the happiness of the just; the punishment of sinners; the sanctity of the social contract and the law – these are the positive dogmas. As for the negative dogmas, I would limit them to a single one: no intolerance. Intolerance is something which belongs to the religions we have rejected.[15]

This remarkable exposition is immediately followed by an even more remarkable claim that betrays another fundamental reason Rousseau needs something like his civil religion. Immediately following his only negative dogma, Rousseau categorically states "It is impossible to live in peace with people one believes to be damned." Leading up to his "damned neighbor" formulation, Rousseau seems to be searching for a positive candidate for a religious basis for society. As it turns out, Rousseau's civil religion also plays a disarming and preventative role. By identifying and rooting out "intolerant" religions, Rousseau aims to protect the state from the peculiar destructive power of the wrong kind of religion.

Rousseau's account of the tension between religion and politics, or better Christianity and politics, is as follows. Human nature has an irreducible religious element and consequently every political body has had a religion at its base. Thus a Rousseauian social contract requires a legitimating religion. The point of view from which we must appraise such a religion is not in terms of its truth, but in terms of its

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12 Ibid., pp. 146–47.

13 Though some have questioned how seriously he took his own formulation. See (Beiner 1993), and his magisterial treatment of civil religion in (Beiner 2011, pp. 1–6, 73–83). Beiner relies almost entirely on *The Social Contract* and the *Geneva Manuscript* (an earlier version of *The Social Contract*), but overstates his case given he does not address some of Rousseau's key other writings, including not only *Corsica* and *Poland* but his Letter to Voltaire.

14 Ibid., p. 150.

15 Ibid.

legitimating potential for the state. Not all religions are equal in this respect, however, and Christianity, while perhaps offering some comfort,[16] is not sufficiently concerned with worldly affairs to act as a reliable religious foundation. Perhaps more important, the *wrong* kind of Christian religion has the potential, indeed the inevitability, of fostering social strife and bloodshed. What is needed is a civil religion that allows various manifestations of religion but includes Rousseau's civil religious dogmas.

This last point is significant in that Rousseau is not proposing a state civil religion that would act as a comprehensive religion in the lives of its citizens. His vision does not include a state-run church in each town dispensing spiritual knowledge and ritual. Rousseau's sovereign has neither the need nor the competence to judge spiritual matters, so long as the *real* religions chosen by his citizens include his civil religion.[17] His civil religion can be described as almost completely dependent on more traditional conceptions of religion:

> [E]ach citizen should have a religion which makes him love his duty, but the dogmas of that religion are of interest neither to the state nor its members, except in so far as those dogmas concern morals and duties which everyone who professes that religion is bound to perform toward others. Moreover, everyone may hold whatever opinions he pleases, without the sovereign having any business to take cognizance of them. For the sovereign has no competence in the other world; whatever may be the fate of the subjects in the life to come, it is nothing to do with the sovereign, so long as they are good citizens in this life.[18]

Rousseau took the possibility of a real civil religion seriously, or at least he wrote as if he did. Near the conclusion of his letter to his frenemy Voltaire, Rousseau describes the need for his civil religion and then implores Voltaire to write up a Catechism of the Citizen:

> This work . . . would be the most useful book ever composed . . . and perhaps the only one needful to men. Here, Sir, is a subject for you. I passionately wish you might be willing to undertake this work and to adorn it with your Poetry, so that from childhood on, everyone being able to learn it easily, it might instill in all hearts those sentiments of gentleness and humanity which shine in your writings, and which the devout have always lacked. I urge you to meditate on this project, which must appeal at least to your soul.[19]

As important as the civil religion is to Rousseau's project, however, it is not enough. It is significant that the civil religion chapter comes at the end of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Its usefulness depends on the existence of a people united by a social contract and guided by their general will. In other words, it is a mechanism of maintenance[20] rather than creation, and while important, it cannot solve the tension of divided authority nor the tension of the divided polity. If the damned neighbor problem pertains to our alienation from fellow citizens, this next tension is between the rulers and the ruled.

3. The Chasm between Rulers and Ruled

The inner division of modern man is a familiar theme in Rousseau's works. In his *Second Discourse*, Rousseau unveils a new version of the fall of humanity, detailing how the introduction of property alienated the individual human being from herself and led to vexed relationships with her neighbors. People began to "look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at [themselves], and public esteem acquired a price."[21] Ambition, unknown to the simple animal that Rousseau describes in the state of nature, infected every human heart and led to the spread of *amour-propre*, the unhealthy love of self.

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16 (Rousseau 1997, pp. 242–43).
17 (Rousseau 2003, p. 150).
18 Ibid.
19 (Rousseau 1997, p. 245).
20 See (Deneen 2005, pp. 158, 330–31n35).
21 (Rousseau 1997, p. 166).

When Rousseau compares the savage man to the citizen, the citizen comes out far worse in the comparison. The citizen is "forever active" and "sweats, scurries, constantly agonizes in search of ever more strenuous occupations: he works to the death, even rushes toward it in order to be in a position to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality."[22] The heart of Rousseau's jeremiad about the condition of modern people is we are split creatures; the individual lives "always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment." As French philosopher Pierre Manent writes, "man lives only for the gaze of others, whom he hates."[23] And Rousseau insists that it was not always thus.

There is also a corporate version of this spiritual division. The corruption that causes the inner division that afflicts individuals also manifests itself in collective groups: nations, city-states, and peoples. Bodies politic are also sickened with *amour-propre*, as Rousseau details extensively in the *Second Discourse*. There is an unhealthy division in society between the haves and the have-nots.

Because people are corrupt and the modern individual wavers between a human identity and a civic identity, governing well is a quixotic enterprise. Rousseau, writing to Count Wielhorski with advice for Poland's political future, cautiously warned the Count of the difficulties inherent in enacting reform. It is possible to make better laws, Rousseau writes, but how does one keep human passions and corruption from seeping in when the laws are interpreted and applied? "Putting the law above man is a problem in politics which I liken to that of squaring the circle."[24]

Rousseau writes elsewhere that "The great problem of statecraft: to find a form of government that puts law above man."[25] Why is it such a difficult problem for a nation to be ruled by law rather than men? People are corrupt, and in his advice for Corsica, Rousseau admits some people are so corrupt that governing well is not merely difficult but impossible; some people are "incapable of being well-governed."[26] But even among people capable of being well-governed, and Rousseau believes the Corsicans are such a people, human passions and the drive of *amour-propre* quickly set in and can ruin even the wisest and most virtuous government and people.[27] Even in the best of conditions human beings will be torn between their individual desires and what is best for the whole, and thus rulers should try to make the best of this basic fact of politics by devising procedural safeguards. Rousseau describes this preventative tactic with characteristic flair:

> Attempts are made to overcome this difficulty by mechanical devices designed to keep the government in its original condition; it is bound with a thousand chains and fetters to prevent it from declining, and is hampered to such an extent that, dragged down by the weight of its irons, it remains inactive and motionless and, if it does not go downhill, neither does it advance toward its goal.[28]

For those unfortunate countries whose people are incapable of good governance this may be the best one can hope for, but for those few nations whose people are able to "receive a good administration" Rousseau holds out a faint hope that the painful split of a nation's soul can be healed. Such a healing depends first on a proper diagnosis, and Rousseau traces the ills of a schizophrenic polity to "an undue separation of two inseparable things, the body which governs and the body which is governed." That is, Rousseau is very concerned here with the gap between the rulers and the ruled, and his social contract is his solution, though it is easy to miss just how "religious" a solution it is.

Rousseau's description of why man needs the social contract is familiar territory. Men are naturally free but require each other. How does one simultaneously offer and receive social cooperation while

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22 Ibid., p. 187.
23 (Manent 1994, p. 70).
24 (Rousseau 2003, p. 179).
25 (Rousseau 2003, pp. 268–71.)
26 (Rousseau 1953, p. 277).
27 For Rousseau as a realist, see (Melzer 1983, pp. 633–51).
28 (Rousseau 1953, p. 277.)

protecting one's individual freedom and property, broadly understood? Or as Rousseau writes, how is it possible "To find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before,"?[29] In other words, how does one create a polity that allows both political sovereignty and freedom? This familiar territory leads us to the even more familiar solution of the general will, Rousseau's basic response to the problem of the split polity. The general will can seem like a contradiction in terms, but it is Rousseau's attempt to combine the ancient *esprit de corps* with the modern contractarian emphasis on will and consent.[30]

Rousseau did not find the term "general will" floating in a vacuum; the term had already been employed in debates about God's will for humanity and salvation.[31] The dilemma arises because, as St. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:4, God wills for all to be saved, and yet, prevailing Christian doctrine at that time and scripture passages such as Matthew 7 (seemed to) teach that most humans will be damned. While this is not the place to descend into the minutia of the theological debates, the main problem was how to reconcile God's goodness and justice with the seeming arbitrariness and injustice of mass eternal damnation. One approach posited that God's general will that all will be saved—a positive understanding of will—contrasted sharply with God's particular will that given human sinfulness many would be damned, a negative understanding of will.

We find antecedents in these theological discussions for Rousseau's contrast between the general and particular will. That the general will is "good" coincides with the attractive idea that all of humanity will be saved. The particular will is associated with sin, death, judgment, and Hell. Theologians as far back as Augustine have emphasized this contrast between a will that pursues "the common and unchangeable good," and the will that "sins" by turning to "its own private good."[32] We can thus better appreciate the cultural milieu into which Rousseau introduced his term, though the theological debate does far more than help us appreciate the strands of thought that may have contributed to both the formulation, and reception, of Rousseau's secularized and political general will. This is because the question of God's will as it relates to man's salvation is illustrative of a more fundamental theological question that is very similar to the problem with which Rousseau grapples.

How is this dilemma about God's relationship to the moral law similar to Rousseau's concerns with the nature of the body politic? We see in the theological debate the fear of a split in God's character. God's goodness leads us to think God will not damn human beings for eternity. God's freedom and sovereignty leads us to think God is perfectly free to do so if God chooses. God's goodness must give way to freedom and sovereignty, or God's freedom and sovereignty must be limited to rescue (our understanding of) God's goodness. Bringing this discussion back to earth, we remember that Rousseau is very concerned with unnatural splits, particularly as they pertain to freedom. The loss of freedom that the individual faces in the rise of society through private property and the creation of the bourgeois is a familiar theme in Rousseau's work,[33] but let us consider the corporate or even national expression of that alienation.

In the beginning of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau reminds us that there is no such thing as a "people" without a first convention or compact. There are no natural "peoples," and he emphatically denies the positivist account that would call a "people" any group held together merely by force: "There will always be a great difference between subjugating a multitude and ruling a society."[34]

What is this difference? Individual men and women are born free. Nothing can compel their consent; to attempt to do so, or to pretend as if one has done so, is to insult their freedom, and

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[29] (Rousseau 2003, pp. 49–50).
[30] See (Riley 1970, p. 86).
[31] For a thorough discussion of this connection, see (Riley 1986).
[32] Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio*, quoted in (Riley 1982, p. 5).
[33] (Rousseau 1997, particularly sect. 1, p. 161 and sect. 17–33, pp. 166–74).
[34] (Rousseau 2003, p. 48).

hence their sovereignty over themselves. When the ruler, whether a single monarch or a democratic multitude, compels the ruled, those under the thumb of the powers that be are subject to a law they did not author. This is a problem for Rousseau's naturally free man just as much as it was for the Christian theologians' essentially free God. If God's will is understood purely as will, then this seems to destroy morality and replace it with arbitrary power. For Rousseau, forcing others to accept a law they had no part in making destroys freedom and makes morality impossible. Any polity that forces its will upon its citizens loses its moral credibility, a political doctrine firmly ensconced in the American political tradition as the consent of the governed. This is a problem for the moral being who is God, but for our purposes also a problem for the moral being that is the society forged by the social contract, for Rousseau spoke of such societies as if they were a sort of civic person, a "moral being with qualities of its own and distinct from those of the particular Beings constituting it . . . ."[35]

This is a crucial problem for Rousseau, and it goes to the core of how the general will and the social contract act as a solution to the problem. To violate someone else's freedom, their will and sovereignty, is the most heinous sin in Rousseau's moral universe. This is why inequality is so important to Rousseau, because it inflames *amour-propre* and makes inevitable the widespread violation of freedom. Our freedom is impossible to exercise without freedom of our wills. The will is an integral part of the moral faculty that allows one to author the law that one accepts. Just as a God who was subject to a more fundamental moral law would not be "God," so a "people" who were subject to a law they did not make cannot be a true people because their collective will would be split. The rulers would be subject to the charge of moral arbitrariness and the ruled would not exercise their will. They would be an aggregation without a common good, a multitudinous mass of private interests where justice is found in the rule of the strongest, which is to say where justice does not exist.

These aggregations are what pass for most political communities in the modern era: a maelstrom of private interest and conflict, of massive inequality where the very rich are enslaved to the protection of wealth which they cannot enjoy and the poor are duped into accepting laws that perpetuate their poverty. Religion and science in their enmity between each other have left ordinary men and women less capable of cultivating genuine virtue and given elites powerful tools to maintain the status quo.[36] In short, everyone is miserable. The challenge facing Rousseau is immense: how can a true "people" be created despite the pervasively corrupting influences of *amour-propre*, Enlightenment rationality, and Christianity? What is to be done?

The only option is to start over. One must recreate a people from the beginning, fashioning them such that *amour-propre* can be limited and the explosive power of religion harnessed for the service of the state. This recreated people will have some similarities to the theologians' god. A new moral being, a civic deity if you will, will have a general will that is indivisible, morally good, and infallible.[37] That the general will is meant to be indivisible is rather clearly spelled out in Chapter Two of Book II in *The Social Contract*, entitled "That Sovereignty is Indivisible." That the general will is morally good, indeed the source of what is considered good within the nation, is emphasized repeatedly throughout Rousseau's *Discourse on Political Economy*. That the general will is infallible is clear from Rousseau's chapter on law in *The Social Contract*. "Just as 'no man can be unjust to himself,' no law derived from the general will can be unjust, 'The general will is always upright . . . .'"

The difference between the theologians' God and Rousseau's civil God is that the theologians trying to understand God dealt with God's essential qualities. Christians believed they could not be otherwise. Rousseau, however, faces a much different situation given that "men's will must be *made* general."[38] We now turn to Rousseau's theoretical and practical strategy for *how* the new people can be created.

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[35] (Rousseau 2003, p. 155).
[36] (Deneen 2005, pp. 146–52).
[37] "The body politic is, then, also a moral being that has a will . . . ." (Rousseau 2003, p. 6).
[38] (Riley 1986, p. 505).

4. A New People in Theory and Practice

Rousseau's vision is profoundly ambitious. We have already discussed his attempt to solve the religious "glue" problem that Christianity makes worse, as well his articulation of the alienation between people who must be free and government which must order and act, and thus interfere with freedom. The social contract is Rousseau's overarching solution to this latter concern, the creation of a political society with a general will that is authored by all those who join it. They do not lose their freedom when the government acts on them because they themselves are the authors of that government.

The most difficult part of enacting Rousseau's solution is the beginning. The decision to enter into the social contract is one in which individuals are asked to give up their naturally selfish rights to become part of a larger whole, to exchange their private good for a common good. The paradox is this: the corrupted individual infected with *amour-propre* gives rise to the need for the social contract in the first place; the very virtues needed for one to willingly accept the social contract are those that the social contract promises to supply. If people were willing to accept the social contract based on the conclusions of reason, they would not need it because they would not be selfish in the first place. Rousseau describes this problem at length in *The Social Contract*, "in order for an emerging people to appreciate the healthy maxims of politics, and follow the fundamental rule of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause."[39]

The only way this paradox is solved is through the creative genius of the founder or great legislator. Rousseau references Moses, Numa, and Lycurgus: great founders who created a people through the sheer force of their personalities. It is important to note the religious nature of the founder's appeal and the incredible task he must perform:

> To discover the best rules of society suited to each Nation would require a superior intelligence who saw all of man's passions and experienced none of them, who had no relation to our nature yet knew it thoroughly, whose happiness was independent of us and who was nevertheless willing to care for ours; finally, one who, preparing his distant glory in the progress of time, could work in one century and enjoy the reward in another.[40]

In other words, writes Rousseau, "It would require gods to give men laws." The Legislator, like Emile's tutor, is nothing short of miraculous, and indeed he too must transform human nature.[41] Pierre Manent observes that Rousseau's *Second Discourse* has set the theoretical groundwork for this transformation of human nature, as it was man's perfectibility that allowed the once simple savage to become the bourgeois man/citizen.[42] If it is man's nature to be free, then there is nothing to say that we cannot consciously attempt to remake man's nature so as to ameliorate his miserable condition. The most difficult and miraculous task the Legislator must perform is to persuade men and women to join the social contract; Rousseau writes that this transformation is impossible without religion. Thus Rousseau's civil religion does more than maintain the just society, it is an essential component of creating that society in the first place.

Rousseau's theory seems so abstract and fanciful that some noted scholars have doubted whether he genuinely intended it for actual, practical politics.[43] Yet we have good reason to believe Rousseau was quite serious about his theories, and we have two remarkable examples of his putting his ideas into practice. In 1764, an officer from Corsica, Captain Buttafoco, invited Rousseau to draft a constitution

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[39] (Rousseau 2003, p. 71). See also (Deneen 2005, pp. 156–60).
[40] Ibid., p. 69.
[41] Ibid. "Anyone who dares to institute a people must feel capable of, so to speak, changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into part of a larger whole from which that individual would as it were receive his life and his being."
[42] (Manent 1994, pp. 73–79).
[43] (Shklar 1966, p. 26).

in case Corsica achieved independence from Genoa. Count Michel-Joseph Wielhorski approached Rousseau in 1770 for advice on how to set up a constitution should a group of confederates achieve independence. Neither Corsica nor Poland was able to achieve independence, though Rousseau was flattered to be asked.

There are a number of reasons to think Rousseau meant for his works on Corsica and Poland to be more than utopian critiques of contemporary society. Rousseau requested historical and geographical materials from his respective correspondents, and he himself wrote to each of them promising to do his best with the task.[44] Rousseau had mentioned Corsica very favorably in *The Social Contract*, and Buttafoco referenced this earlier mention in asking Rousseau to draft a constitution for Corsica in 1764. Rousseau, Cranston remarks, "was thrilled" and wrote back to Buttafoco that the idea "lifts my soul and transports me." Rousseau was also pleased to be approached in 1770 by Count Wielhorski, who represented an alliance of Catholic aristocrats, and spent six months working on the project. In fact, it is rather remarkable that we find in the canon of political philosophy two such candid attempts to apply an abstract work of political theory to two real political situations. What, then, do we find when we read Rousseau's advice to Poland and Corsica? Does he attempt to put his radical transformation project into action? If so, how?

In his plan for Corsica, Rousseau follows his articulation of the split constitution with a bold proposal that goes beyond the procedural devices proffered that at best keep the state in a sort of holding pattern. Faced with the difficulties of governing, even wise men will settle for this half-hearted solution, but Rousseau will not:

> Really shrewd men, in such cases, follow the line of expediency, and shape the government to fit the nation. There is, however, something far better to be done, namely to shape the nation to fit the government.[45]

This is not idle chatter for Rousseau, and it is all the more remarkable coming in a document that contains practical constitutional advice, as the Corsica draft does have concrete rules and applications. The first rule, however, is one of national character, and every nation must have a national character; if a nation did not, one would have to be invented.[46] Moreover this character must be imprinted into the very essence of the citizens, as Rousseau again insists that practical tactics and governmental procedures, while important, are not sufficient:

> It is easy to see how these advantages are brought about by the system for which we have expressed our preference; but that is not enough. It is a question of causing the people to adopt these practices, to love the way of life we want to give them, to make it the centre of their pleasures, desires and tastes, and in general to render it their only happiness in life, and the only goal of their ambitions.[47]

This is one of a number of passages that show *what* the solution entails—a transformative education—but does not tell us *how* such a solution is to be achieved. It is certainly true that Rousseau's advice for Poland differs from his advice for Corsica. This speaks to how seriously he took these projects and how realistic he was in adapting various aspects of his abstract theory to political reality.[48] Yet we do find some commonalities in both works. We recall that Rousseau likened the crafting of a good constitution to squaring the circle. He writes, "No constitution will ever be good and solid unless the

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[44] (Cranston 1997, pp. 94, 177).

[45] (Rousseau 1953, p. 277). In *Political Economy*, Rousseau says something similar: "Certain it is in the long run peoples are what government make them be." (Rousseau 2003, p. 13).

[46] (Rousseau 1953, p. 293).

[47] Ibid., p. 300.

[48] This is particularly true with *Poland*, as Rousseau's reforms are certainly not as radical as they could have been. See Vaughan, *The Political Writings*, 378–79. See also (Rousseau 2003, Book III, Chap. 8).

law rules the citizen's hearts. So long as the legislative force does not reach that deep, the laws will invariably be evaded. *But how can men's hearts be reached*?"[49]

Rousseau considered and rejected many potential candidates for reaching men's hearts. Ancient religion such as that found in Sparta and Rome is obscured by too many years and is too bloodthirsty. Christianity, of course, is out of the question. The natural religion Rousseau describes in *Emile* through the voice of the Savoyard vicar may be true, but is not sufficiently civic-minded for the needs of the state. On the other hand, shaping the citizenry by fear and force is not only unjust but ineffective, leading inevitably to a divided and weak society. Rousseau is also skeptical of material rewards acting as an effective incentive, presumably because without restraining *amour-propre* the acquisition of riches merely encourages an insatiable appetite to distinguish oneself from others. Rousseau even considers, and rejects, justice because it is, like health, "a good which one enjoys without feeling it, which inspires no enthusiasm, and the value of which one feels only once it has been lost."[50]

The answer is to reshape the inward man. This is done explicitly through education, law, and culture. While Machiavelli argued that it is better for the sovereign to be feared than loved, Rousseau insists that the nation must be loved, and the state must insure that this is so from the very beginning. We find throughout Rousseau's work specific instructions on how the state should engage in soulcraft.[51]

From Poland:

> How, then, can one move hearts, and get the fatherland and its laws loved? Dare I say it? with children's games; with institutions which appear trivial in the eyes of superficial men, but which form cherished habits and invincible attachments.[52]

And:

> It is national institutions which form the genius, the character, the tastes, and the morals of a people, which make it be itself and not another, which inspire in it that ardent love of fatherland founded on habits impossible to uproot.

Love of country is the true heart of the civil religion. Although it is listed as one of the positive maxims of Rousseau's civil religion, it is easily the most crucial and does what morality alone cannot:

> It is not enough to tell the citizens, be good; they have to be taught to do so; and example itself, which in this respect is the first lesson, is not the only means that should be used: *love of fatherland is the most effective*.[53]

Education means not only basic learning but indoctrination and assimilation. Poles are created in the image of Poles, Corsicans in the image of Corsicans, and so on. Thus Rousseau advises the Poles to consider every Pole a "teacher" and to disallow any foreigner from teaching children.[54] Rousseau emphasizes the centrality of education in fashioning young souls in the national image. Education must "give souls the national form," directing "their tastes and opinions that they will be patriotic by inclination, passion, necessity." When a Polish babe first opens his eyes, he "should see the fatherland, and see only it until his dying day."[55] Thus we see how Rousseau's civil religion is much deeper than a mere peacekeeping device tacked onto the end of *The Social Contract*. In Rousseau's design the State becomes *everything* to its citizens, outranking any other claim to authority.

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[49] (Rousseau 2003, p. 179). Emphasis mine.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Rousseau is explicit that this is what the state is doing: "Whoever goes about instituting a people has to be able to rule men's opinions and through them to govern their passions." Ibid, p. 189.
[52] (Rousseau 2003, p. 179).
[53] Rousseau, (Rousseau 2003, p. 15). And in (Rousseau 2003, p. 189), "Whoever goes about instituting a people has to be able to rule men's opinions and through them govern their passions . . . . Sumptuary laws, by restraining desire, stimulate it instead of extinguishing it with punishment. Simplicity of morals and of attire is less the fruit of law than of education."
[54] (Rousseau 2003, p. 190).
[55] Ibid., p. 189.

In *Poland*, Rousseau highlights the need for educational transformation, elaborates on the role of the Legislator, and offers practical tips for inculcating both the proper education and a Polish civil religion.[56] We have already read passages calling for a transformative education. Rousseau's discussion of the Legislator is found early on in the work and highlights Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa, all of whom, in their particular ways suited to their particular peoples, "sought bonds that might attach the Citizens to the fatherland and to one another, and they found them in distinctive practices, in religious ceremonies which by their nature were always exclusive and national (see the end of *The Social Contract*) . . . ."

Here, we have both the Legislator and the civil religion mentioned, along with *The Social Contract* by name.[57] This section on the Legislator, which precedes the section on application and education, emphasizes the various means that Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa took to create and mold their peoples: "distinctive rites and ceremonies," "barriers" to separate the people from their neighbors, (Moses) "in its laws, in its games, in its home, in its loves, in its feasts," along with an iron yoke (Lycurgus), and "mild institutions" that, rather than laws, attached the people to the soil and each other (Numa). In other words, Rousseau identifies the success of his heroes with the very same sorts of things he is going to suggest for the Poles.

While there is more than can here be prudently described, including a detailed program for reforming governmental bodies, some more notable suggestions are as follows. Rousseau advocates reforming the civil service so that the second highest tier (before serving in the Senate) is teaching.[58] Parents may, however, teach their children at home, but all children are required to attend public exercises and games where they will become accustomed early on to "rule, equality, to fraternity, to competitions, to living under the eyes of their fellow-citizens and to seeking public approbation."[59] The military must be reformed so that there is a citizen army, like in Switzerland, which will help boost patriotism.[60] Formal insignia and uniforms shall be designed that designate different classes of patriots and honor service to the country.[61] One could go on and on describing these means, and Rousseau certainly does, describing his work as laying out the means to the end.

I will close this section with just one more practical proposal made by Rousseau. One of the thorniest problems for Poland was its relation to its king, and Rousseau offered an interesting incentive to encourage succeeding Polish kings to truly seek out the common good of the entire country. Rousseau proposes a kind of secular afterlife for each ruler; that at the passing of each king a solemn tribunal will judge whether the king has been a "good and just Prince." If so, his name will be "inscribed with honor in the roll of the Kings of Poland, his body ceremoniously entombed in their burial-ground, the epithet *of glorious memory* added to his name in all public documents and speeches, a dower settled on his widow, and his children, created royal Princes, would be honored throughout their lives . . . ."[62]

Of course, if the ruler has not been so fortunate in character, he will be laid to rest with no pomp or pageantry and his name will be forgotten, his family disgraced. At first glance this may seem a

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[56] *Corsica* has its practical suggestions as well, but less than *Poland* in part because Rousseau thinks the Corsican character more virtuous and less corrupted.

[57] Ibid., p. 181. *The Social Contract* is also mentioned by name on pages 199, 200, 203, 209, 210, and 255. This is strong evidence that counters Beiner's conclusion that Rousseau meant his civil religion to pose only questions and no practical solutions. (Beiner 2011, p. 83).

[58] Ibid., p. 241.

[59] Ibid., p. 191. While parents have a say, the state decides (Rousseau 2003, p. 21):

> [T]he education of their children ought even less to be abandoned to their fathers' lights and prejudices, since it matters to the state even more than it does to the fathers; for in the course of nature the father's death often deprives him of the last fruits of that education, but the fatherland feels its effects sooner or later; the state endures and the family dissolves.

[60] (Rousseau 2003, pp. 235–38).

[61] Ibid., p. 238.

[62] Ibid., p. 253.

rather dangerous proposition as Rousseau allows for citizens to accuse, or defend, each king at his tribunal. Yet if we recall Rousseau's emphasis for theater, spectacle, and, frankly, manipulation, it is not hard to imagine clever patriots using such a "mild institution" to maintain and even inflame the patriotism of the people. A more explicit exemplar of a civil religious rite would be hard to find.[63]

5. Conclusions

Some of what Rousseau took for granted in his day is no longer true or perhaps is less true. Christianity is no longer the political and cultural force it once was, at least in the West. Contemporary critics of religion can write much worse than Rousseau and not fear for their lives (though the same cannot be said in other parts of the world). And some aspects of his proposed social contract we find strange and deeply illiberal and unjust, such as capital punishment for those who accept and then reject the social contract.

Yet some of Rousseau's claims, questions, and solutions remain salient. Perhaps the American political experiment has refuted Rousseau's "damned neighbor" problem insofar as Americans can live peacefully with neighbors they do not expect to see in the hereafter, as noted by not only Philip Gorski but the great (political) liberal John Rawls.[64] But the question of social cohesion and national unity remains a worry as political polarization increases and "red" and "blue" identities seem more tribal than ever.

Rousseau's claim that every nation needs a religion at its base seems problematic on the surface, but only if "religion" must be understood in the traditional sense. If we understand religion as functionally as that which provides meaning for people individually and commonality for the group—the etymological root of "religion" is *ligare*, to bind together—then we moderns and postmoderns must grapple with what it means for Americans to be a *people* united by more than accidents of geography and a common tax code. It is not hard to see some affinity between Rousseau's call for a unifying religion and American civil religious rituals (national anthem at sporting events), holy days (4th July, Memorial Day), and civic saints (Washington, Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Given the default monotheism of America's past seems to be fading, Rousseau's pointed criticisms of Christianity may strike many moderns as outdated. Nevertheless, while his insistence on a rather coercive enforcing of tolerance seems heavy-handed, toleration has become one of the most important and contested political virtues, as even when a religion's cultural potency is on the wane, a culture still has to work out the details of competing claims of conscience, religious practice, and civil rights.

Rousseau's detailed educational plans for Polish and Corsican patriotism may strike us as historical oddities unless we see with fresh eyes how fiercely Americans debate the means and modes of raising children, and the various heated controversies about public and charter schools, vouchers and homeschooling, and American history textbooks. One suspects closely beneath the surface of these debates is a concern about a common identity, and how to cultivate that identity, that Rousseau would have found quite familiar. Are there lessons we might we draw from Rousseau's contributions to this question? Is there a path forward that takes seriously the concerns he describes so well without adopting some of the decidedly illiberal elements of his solution?

Finally, Rousseau's prescribed role for the state cuts to the heart of one of the most delicate and important debates in American politics. To what extent should the state engage in *shaping* its citizens? In a political tradition based in part on the doctrine of the consent of the governed, what does it mean for the government to take an active role in (re)creating the We the People which grounds the government's legitimacy to begin with? It is obvious that the details of Rousseau's life differ significantly in many

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[63] Did Rousseau really think that his more practical approach to civil religion would solve the problem? Should we adopt some version of it for ourselves? There is good reason to question whether even his formulation would solve the demanding problem he articulated so well in the civil religion chapter of *The Social Contract*. Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this essay, though it is suggestive that Rousseau's last works were decidedly introspective rather than political.

[64] (Gorski 2017, p. 72; Rawls 1999, p. 189).

ways from our own. Yet his insights and provocations are more than historical curiosities. They offer us diagnostic tools with which we can grapple with the complicated entanglement of religion, politics, education, and social cohesion, crucial components of our shared and complex society that show no signs of fading into obscurity in the near or distant future.

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