

Vol. 5 No. 1 Spring 2026

PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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The Declaration and the World at 250: The Challenge of Globalization

John W. Grant

FOUNDING PRINCIPLES

The 250th anniversary of American independence provides a fitting occasion to consider the fate of America's founding principles in relation to the world. After all, the Declaration was written out of a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind...." The founders thought it necessary to explain to the world the causes of the "separation," the dissolution of the "political bands" or "political connection" between the now "free and independent states" and Great Britain. They held that the laws of nature and nature's God allowed America to assume a "separate and equal station" among the nations of the world. In our globalized time, the separate and equal status of nations is denied in principle and in practice.

A summary view of the founding principles is needed to understand the principled ground that the founders held and which justified the dissolution of the political relationship with England. The enumeration of self-evident truths in the Declaration of Independence begins with the assertion "that all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." It follows that "Governments are instituted among Men" in order "to secure these rights." Governments derive their "just powers" from "the consent of the governed."

Other important founding-era documents elaborate on these fundamental principles. In the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, equality is described thusly: "All men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity." The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 asserts that "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights." The residents of Northampton, Massachusetts, discussing the proposed state constitution in the Return of Northampton from 1780, explained that the meaning of "born free and equal ... is true only with respect to the right of dominion, and jurisdiction over one another." In other words, equality means that all human beings are born free of the non-consensual political rule of other human beings; all men are naturally equal in their power and dominion. This natural equality of

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and government, than from a negative, where it falls short. Upon recognition and retrieval of the founding's conservatism does improvement open her doors.

As he edited Edmund Burke's writings on the events of 1688 and 1689 in England, E.J. Payne invoked Sir Joseph Jekyll, describing the Glorious "Revolution" of 1688 as "a revolution not made, but prevented." Kirk employed this phrase, correctly, to the American founding. The American founding is a founding not liberal, but conserving. It was a recovery of something that had been lost, seized once in the eighteenth century and something retrievable in the twenty-first century. To quarrel over an alleged liberal founding is to strike at the illusory, especially when the harbinger of liberal ideology in the West may be found in revolutionary France. To characterize the founding as such is to forego the true character of it and foster an unwarranted hostility toward it.

The American founding's conservatism was in service of a more holistic purpose, far exceeding the good achieved by its laudable amelioration of the founding's partial liberalism: the sustainment of order, "the first need of the soul" and "of the commonwealth."⁴⁹ Without the normative order of conservatism, the blessings of liberty would decay.⁵⁰ This underlying order points to the metaphysics of conserved things; one finds it in Kirk's adopted concepts of "the permanent things" and the "moral imagination," which profess the existence of right order in life and the sense and drive for such order.⁵¹ Knowing these sorts of verities to have once permeated America, we can confidently say the founders "built surely and well."⁵² By way of its conservatism, there is an inheritance in the American founding; we need only say yes to it. Only then can Americans wisely pursue the good of the realm following the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of American independence.

⁴⁹ Kirk, *Roots of the American Order*, 6.

⁵⁰ Conservatism, being a disposition of life, runs deeper than politics. It is the bedrock and guide of those adopted liberal tenets of the founding. It sustained those tenets insofar as they were successful principles in tradition and continuity. It contains that implicit metaphysics, the metaphysics of conserved things, which perpetuates right form and teleology of life. In all these ways, one cannot have ordered liberty without the order gifted by conservatism.

⁵¹ Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination," *Kirkcenter.org*; May 31, 2007. The permanent things, borrowed from T.S. Eliot, are the venerable norms of human nature. The moral imagination, borrowed from Edmund Burke, is that innate sense for the order of the soul and society. Kirk's definition of norms is greatly related to the two aforementioned ideas. See Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (New Rochelle NY: Arlington House, 1969), 15–27.

⁵² P.H. Ditchfield, *The Manor Houses of England* (London: Bracken Books, 1985), 6. Like the English manor house, America was built to last. In conservatism, there is confidence, hence the founders "built surely and well." With respect to the metaphysics of conserved things (and the remote influence of classical-scholastic thought), it rings true that the founders were "building wiser than they knew." One can say America was "built" in both ways. See The Archbishops and Bishops of the United States, *Pastoral Letter of the Third Plenary Council* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Publishing Company, 1885), 20.

The American founding was partially liberal, but its select liberal principles were never divorced from the founding's interwoven conservatism. Rather, these curated liberal principles were truly good political advancements in the American context because their underlying metaphysical assumptions were not rejections of sound philosophy, but were, in practice and effect, a specialized subset of classical-scholastic philosophy. Additionally, these principles were significantly shaped and directed by a conservative framework of personhood, society, and politics. Conservatism's sage prescriptions, wise temperaments, and conservative framework all served as substitutes for the deficiencies present in liberalism's metaphysics, for they provided the essences and purposes necessary to sustain a people and their civil social order.

The American founding was spared a collapse like that of revolutionary France because it was a founding in conservatism. Indeed, the founding marked a milestone of success rather than the start of a gradual decline. Yet, because of the Fall, nothing is safe from error. One should expect no fault of the founding greater than any other imperfect system comprised of fallible people. In fact, with respect to political institutions, one should expect to find *less* fault in the American founding than in other modern foundings precisely because the erroneous metaphysics of liberalism was inactive and superseded by America's substantive conservatism.

The only institution that is free from any absolute error—not in prudential areas—is the Catholic Church divinely instituted.⁴⁷ All other institutions are fallible. If one ignores the good to focus solely on fallible systems and people, or ignores those who manipulate the good into evil, he instead makes the perfect the enemy of the good. This impossible standard errs on the side of ideology, which is to chase the perfection of heaven in earthly political schemes. Conservative Christians accept that man is imperfectible. The statesman is not called to make society perfect, only tolerable—perhaps even a little better. Weaving liberty and order in the trust of tradition and the knowledge of man's fallen nature, Edmund Burke wrote, "Liberty is a good to be improved, and not an evil to be lessened."⁴⁸ Similarly, the American founding is better viewed from a positive, where it has greatly succeeded for the goods of man, society,

⁴⁷ To reiterate, even if one believes the Catholic Church does not hold such a status, it is still true that manmade institutions like governments or universities are subject to mistakes and errors.

⁴⁸ Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1967), 73.

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hearts animates swift destruction. Sadly, America seems to continue to lose the goods it once preserved. This is in part due to Americans'—and especially intellectual conservatives'—blindness towards the conservatism of the founding. Many Americans and many intellectual conservatives blindly confuse the American founding for a liberal enterprise, but liberalism, on further inspection, is more orthogonal to the founding than previously thought.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the original question, is the American founding at fault for the growing reign of isolated individualism, libertine morals, majoritarian tyranny, harmful market practices, state-coerced markets, and engulfing centralization in America today? Postliberals and their fellow travelers usually place the fault in the founding because they see it as the embodiment of liberalism. Disproving the contention that the founding is fundamentally liberal where liberalism can cause societal dissolution does not preclude the possibility that the founding was the root cause of societal collapse through different means. While this paper does not delve into other possible causes of today's problems, it does suggest that they are intimately connected to the development of rash majorities formed in colossal electorates, the turning of the Declaration of Independence into an ideological tract, and the erosion of federalism, none of which is integral to or present in the founding. In fact, these were all real fears that the founders took seriously.

Looking to the contents of the Declaration of Independence and thus the substance of the founders and founding, it is not the case that the events of 1776 are the cause of today's ills. On the contrary, the founding is perhaps where Americans ought to look for solutions. It was shown that the founding did not signify a liberal *project*, a *proposition* nation, or an *experiment* in self-government; it was a people's conservative reaction to the radical innovations of Great Britain. It was a pursuit to maintain the personal, societal, and governmental conditions familiar to themselves for over one hundred and sixty years. These ways of life were not errors conserved, but that which is captured in the six conservative canons and ten conservative principles: the loose collection of ways that make life beautiful, livable, and prosperous. In choosing intimacy over ideals, colonial Americans chose hearth over flames.

are perfectible through human device alone. According to the ideologue, if the founding had even a sliver of error, then it would have inevitably failed, never being able to produce the perfect society on earth he desperately desires.

Critics on the Right locate the origin of today's struggles in that deficient metaphysics tacitly assumed by the founding's sparse liberalism. Ironically, they overlook the tacit metaphysics of the founding's conservatism and its influences. Sage prescription is olden observation made perpetual for good reason, wise temperament is the experienced heart acting in accordance with its God given nature, and conservative framework is the sturdy home of the tried and true. A metaphysics of conserved things is one of a people that experienced, trialed, intuited, and intellected the successful goods for society. It recognizes the proper nature and purpose of man, society, and government.

This metaphysics of conserved things, canons, and principles is the root of the conservatism that informed both the American founding *as a whole* and its select liberal principles *as particulars*. These prescriptions, temperaments, and framework were not adopted through abstract reasoning, but first by the lamp of experience, a decidedly Aristotelian approach. The philosophical critic of the founding is often fine to fit Aristotle's pagan ideas by way of Islamic philosophers, but grows weary at the idea that a few good political developments came *through* Enlightenment liberalism and *in* Protestant colonies; the praiseworthy in either comes from good classical-scholastic ideas and good conservative traditions. Ultimately, a true philosophical account must address the conservative structures that *informed* and *gave purpose to* the founding's partial liberalism—which achieved some success by its own merits, especially with the help of conservatism's metaphysical assumptions.

In explaining why the American founding prospered with select liberal principles, the greater of the two reasonings presented is that the American founders sought to conserve something proper and familiar to themselves. What they conserved was successfully battle-tested and rooted in good metaphysics and the transcendent order as described by Kirk. Conversely, the French Revolution was a radical destruction of society, not just an alteration of government. Liberal principles without proper guidance will either become ideological commandments or deepen in error instead of being transformed well. Active error can corrupt a good people and ideologues can bring about great disaster: the radicalism in their

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The critic may rebut that the combination of liberal and conservative principles with respect to their underlying metaphysics is a synthesis doomed to fail. This simply fails to address the second reasoning; there is not a synthesis of liberalism and conservatism in the American founding, but a supplementation and superseding by conservatism and its right metaphysical assumptions. Even then, that rebutting sentiment seems to both deny the strength of good metaphysics, ethics, and politics to then present only a fatalistic nihilism. Are conservatism and Christianity so weak that they can be overtaken by liberalism without question? This view is both an improbable view of good concepts and a seemingly hopeless one. Those who see liberalism as an unstoppable force may find that Western civilization and Christendom are difficult to build but easy to destroy, like a fragile sculpture under threat of a sledgehammer. Instead, this dichotomy is better understood as siege warfare: an array of bombards against the bulwarks of a city. Either side may gain the advantage, but it is wrong to suppose conservatism and Christianity are too feeble to defend the good life. In the fullness of time, God wins the war, even if America loses battles.

As noted above, the mere existence of conservatism does not necessarily mean that the metaphysical errors of the founding's partial liberalism were inactive or superseded. The truth of inactivity and supersession comes from the realization that conservatism was able to supplement the roles of essence and purpose in a political theory and practice devoid of such concepts—a theory that achieved some truth of its own accord. Conservatism sustains social cohesion, justice, and duty where liberalism cannot. The innate conservatism of the founding serves as a healing concrete poured into the cracks of liberalism's faulty metaphysical foundation, but this conservatism itself is the cornerstone of the founding. Conservatism's substitutive forms and purposes rendered the metaphysical errors of the founding's select liberal principles practically inactive and replaced.

The successes of the American founding were brought about by that innate conservatism, its effects, and that which it affected. The actual and possible negative effects of liberalism's metaphysical shortcomings are no greater than what someone might expect from any other fallible, imperfect, or incomplete idea, institution, or people. Otherwise, to suppose that supremely detrimental effects are inevitable because of the mere happenstance of tacit belief, proven to be feeble, is to consequently hold an ideological standard for man and his creations. This sort of notion reveals an implicit assumption that man and earthly institutions

and incomplete metaphysics. There were genuine goods to be gained from these concepts, even if they were insufficient and lacked guiding forms and standards. It is akin to discovering some truth of a poem when reading only the first of three stanzas. The critic may argue that while the first reasoning asserts inactivity of the flawed metaphysics, it does not prove that this inactivity is perpetual. Thus, he might say that this metaphysics is like a live ordnance, liable to explode at any moment. While this dormant threat hypothesis is disproven by the evidence of success in America both leading up to 1776 and in the following decades—especially considering the immediate collapse of French society at the end of the eighteenth century—, there is a more substantive explanation for the founding's real success, lack of swift failure, and absence of that which grows errors into failure with respect to adopted liberal principles.

This leads to a second reasoning in two parts. With respect to the first part, the American founding was a revolution not made but prevented. It conserved a society that valued good principles, good practices, and good beliefs. Even the Declaration's seemingly ambiguous principles were rooted in ancient and medieval sources that had been field-tested over centuries in the British Isles. The colonists and founders preserved a society that believed in the Christian God and His precepts, clung to sage prescription, held to tradition and custom, and submitted to the wisdom of prudence and experience as presented in the conservative canons and principles.

The second part of the second reasoning is that those select liberal principles were influenced and guided by the fundamentally conservative character of American society and American political thought. Through the American founding, the colonists preserved ordered liberty against total liberation, equality under the law and under God's judgement against relativization and levelling, and traditional rights against a wave of vast permissiveness. Those few principles of the founding were wedded to the sage prescriptions, wise temperaments, and conservative framework of American society. While liberal metaphysics provided the founding's select liberal principles no natures or purposes, it was the classical-scholastic natures and purposes implicit and inherent to the founding's conservatism that informed said principles. Conservatism was the chief factor of colonial life, orders of magnitude greater than the admirable sparse liberalism it informed, and it was by that abundance that a curated liberalism was supplemented well.

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two reasonings. The first reasoning demonstrates inactivity of flawed liberal metaphysics, while the second reasoning reveals the supersession of it by a sound metaphysical framework.

First, this specific group of founding principles—equality, liberty, natural rights, limited government, consent of the governed, and the right to abolish a government—was fruitful because its application was not energized by explicit denials of certain classical-scholastic metaphysical concepts. Rather these principles were adopted as if their underlying metaphysical assumptions were a specialized subset.⁴⁵ One finds an analogy between the new science of the Scientific Revolution and the liberalism of the Enlightenment.

The Scientific Revolution adopted a metaphysics that sought to study only matter and physical causality; it focused on material and efficient causality and had little to say about formal and final causality that was not condemnatory. While focusing exclusively on material and efficient causality, the new science has been incalculably successful, even though its metaphysical assumptions reject the ideas of essence and purpose as it experiments. Material blessings like the efficient movement of data and communication, medicine, transportation, food access, comfort, and longevity of life grow at exponential rates to the benefit of all. These can even afford consequent *spiritual* blessings. Yet there is also a *hidden fact* about the Scientific Revolution's assumptions and productions. The resolute good of the new science did not arise from a focus on formal and final causality, but it did not come from negating their existence either. The study of material and efficient causality does not necessarily deny essence and purpose. So, the new science thrived as a specialized analysis, the study of matter and agent as a subset of classical-scholastic metaphysics as a whole. One can apply the same metric of evaluating the Scientific Revolution and the new science to the Enlightenment and liberalism in the American founding. Both produced significant goods in their respective areas through a non-rejecting specialization of their metaphysics.⁴⁶

With this first reasoning in mind, it becomes more plausible that the American founding did not succumb to the metaphysical errors of the few liberal ideas present; plausibility becomes practical certainty when the second reasoning is appended to the first. When practiced, those principles were successful in certain respects, despite their tacitly assumed

⁴⁵ There is something to be said about the possibility of unexpected effects from form and telos on an ethics and politics that does not recognize them, but this is a conjecture for future exploration.

⁴⁶ See Nathan W. Schlueter, "[Postliberal Dogmatism and Determinism](#)," *Law & Liberty*, June 29, 2021, in reply to Hanby's philosophical arguments regarding the effects of liberalism's tacit metaphysical assumptions on the founding.

INTERPRETING THE SELECT LIBERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE FOUNDING

The select liberal principles of the American founding in the Declaration of Independence are not nascent monsters but concepts guided by a conservative structure. They are non-inventive inheritances that developed and flourished over centuries, objects worthy of preservation. But to the root of the issue: are these principles invariably flawed because of the faulty metaphysics underpinning liberalism?

It is true that the liberalism of the Enlightenment suffers insufficient metaphysics. Its metaphysics rejects the concepts of natural essence and inherent purpose of man, society, will, and government; however, the philosophical critic cannot argue that these metaphysical judgments were explicit drivers of the American founding because their cause for independence was more tangible than philosophical. One can only argue that these metaphysical principles were tacitly held. And while one could argue that they were gradually destructive or simply remained dormant, colonial life from the settlement of Jamestown to the events of 1776 seems to deny these characterizations. One may counter that the timeline for liberalism's destruction is longer, that the seeds of destruction sown in 1776 were the *beginning of the end*. But, what then of the French Revolution? In a matter of a *few years*, France immediately succumbed to the radical upheaval of liberal ideology—driven more by the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau than Locke and Montesquieu.⁴³ The critic may reply that because France was under the spell of liberal *ideology*, it fell quickly, while because America adopted only liberal *error*, it would experience a gradual deconstruction. This argument depends greatly upon the presumption that the metaphysical errors of the founding's select liberal principles were *not* inactive *nor* superseded by a good metaphysical framework.

Why did the “united States” not immediately suffer by the hands of their select liberal principles?⁴⁴ It would seem that the faulty metaphysics of these principles would erode any present goods at the time or over time. The founding did not suffer by these principles for

⁴³ Conversely, colonial American politics was influenced more by Locke and Montesquieu than by Voltaire and Rousseau from a quantitative perspective. From 1760 to 1779, Locke and Montesquieu were the most cited authors in American colonial political writings. The Bible was referenced most frequently, however. See Donald S. Lutz, “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought,” *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 1 (March 1984): 193–94.

⁴⁴ The “united States” at this time was a union of “free and independent” States, not a single nation, hence the use of the uncapitalized, “united.” This is supported by the fact that “State” is capitalized and was convertible with “country” or “nation” in the 1700s. It is also supported by the fact that the Treaty of Paris was between Great Britain and thirteen “free sovereign and Independent States,” each individually named.