

*Bruce Frohnen*

## What We Are Fighting For

In even the greatest tragedy there lies opportunity. In the tragedy of 9/11, one important opportunity is that of rethinking what we stand for as Americans. We can examine what it is that is most at risk in this struggle, what the terrorists hate so much—in other words, what it means to be an American. In doing so, we can gain renewed understanding of what is most valuable in our culture. Perhaps we may even learn how to protect these valuable things better, both now and in the future.

Surely President Bush was close to the truth when he noted, soon after the attacks, that the terrorists' primary target was America's freedom. Yet "freedom" means different things to different people. To the terrorists and their supporters it means decadence and corruption—the "freedom" of shallow materialism and the hedonism of pornography and other biologically based vices. Thus, they paint our society as a spreading cancer of corruption threatening their own, supposedly pure, culture. To America's liberal elites, "freedom" means a society in which individuals simply follow their desire of the moment, without any inhibition or criticism; it means the absence of authoritative standards, particu-

larly those based in religion, to guide our public and private conduct. Consequently, elite journalists decry American religious leaders almost as loudly as they do Islamic extremists. They paint our current struggle as one of rational, enlightened individualism against every form of religious authority that presumes to "impose" duties on its adherents—at least, beyond such liberal duties as tolerance and niceness.

The "freedom" condemned by our enemies bears a striking resemblance to the "freedom" praised by our liberal elites. Both denote "freedom from" meaningful standards of virtuous conduct. The similarities stem, in part at least, from the attempt to capture the nature of an entire society or culture with a word, freedom, that historically has been used primarily to describe only formal political institutions. If we take freedom in this strictly political sense, it does capture much of what we are defending. Limited government, consent of the governed, toleration of minority views, and the willingness of governors to share and

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even give up power—all are aspects of free government beyond the ken of our terrorist enemies. But important as it is, “freedom” does not fully capture the form of government under which we live. After all, our political system is not completely devoid of authoritative standards, rules, and structures. Most of us, most of the time, are free from the threat of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. But this is in large part because we have laws that, in theory at least, apply to everyone, including our rulers. Our society may be called “free” because our political order is just that—*ordered* through social and legal norms which help to guide our conduct, even when the police are not present.

Our deep respect for standards of conduct is revealed most clearly by our outrage at the terrorists’ intentional killing of innocent women and children. The imperative to protect noncombatants, like the imperative to respect dissenting viewpoints, is a moral norm unknown to our terrorist adversaries. Such social norms, along with our remarkably stable political structures, shows that ours is not a system of lawless anarchy but rather one of ordered liberty.

Some argue that toleration, political rule-following, and concern for noncombatants are only instrumental values—necessary for the continued flourishing of a system of ordered liberty, perhaps, but not valuable in themselves. In one sense this clearly is true. Ordered liberty cannot exist without fairly rigorous standards of personal conduct encompassing notions of fair play and reasoned argument. As Edmund Burke noted, “Men of intemperate minds cannot be free, their passions forge their fetters.” But this reliance of political freedom on pre-political factors such as emotional and cultural stability makes clear that what we are defending in the war against terrorism, and what defines us as Americans, is not the mere absence of authority. What we are

defending is something even more important than our system of free government. What makes us Americans, and what makes America worth defending, is our character as a *free people*. We are not Americans merely on account of our particular political institutions, but on account of the beliefs, practices, and traditions that make it possible for these institutions to function and endure. Put another way, our written constitution lays out our form of free government, but the unwritten constitution of our character and our culture makes that constitution vital and viable.

It seems clear, then, that what we are defending in our conflict with Islamic extremism is our culture—the habits of conduct and belief we have formed as a people over generations. More even than this, we are defending the civilization, stretching back thousands of years, which shapes our culture, giving it meaning and permanence. The cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices we as Americans take for granted—such as trial by jury, religious toleration, and free elections—are products of a deeper commonality we share. They have their basis in our religious and philosophical outlook—in what Matthew Arnold characterized as the creative tension between Jerusalem and Athens and what Russell Kirk termed the roots of American order.

Our civilization, that of Western Christendom or, if you prefer, simply the West, provides the key motivating elements that shape the institutions, beliefs, and practices of our American culture. Through its history the West has encompassed many cultures, which one might equate with certain peoples (for example the English, the French, or the Irish) because they constitute separate, identifiable ways of life that bind certain groups together over long stretches of time. The encounter, and incorporation, of Goths and Gauls and Celts with and into Western civilization was trans-

formative for each. The West stamped these cultures with fundamental common elements which are nonetheless not universal but peculiar to our civilization—elements either rejected or else accepted with wildly divergent interpretations in other civilizations. Key among these deep motive factors of our civilization are the separation of religious norms from politics, the drive to emulate the divine in our earthly endeavors, and a belief in the sanctity of the individual.

It is ironic that our liberal elites identify the source and essence of our freedom as the absence of religion from our public lives. True, our civilization owes its essential character to the separation of religiously based higher law from the contingencies of politics. But that separation, far from “freeing” politics from religion, in fact sets religious moral norms *above* politics and political power, in a position from which they can guide our public conduct without becoming the mere tools of those in control of the machinery of power. Before Moses, political rulers had claimed the status of gods, making and remaking fundamental laws and seeking to re-shape the very character of their peoples. Through Moses’ experience on Mount Sinai, the Jews challenged this practice and set the Western tradition in motion. How so? By experiencing a leap in being whereby they accepted a power higher than themselves, and higher than any human leader they might choose. When Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, he not only brought God’s law to his people, he brought to them a new concept of public life, in which standards of conduct were to be found in a power higher than any human will.

Within the Christian world, the higher law tradition spawned a fundamental separation between religion and politics, and with it the primacy of moral norms over

political expediency. Political history in the West has largely consisted of attempts to put into action the religious principle that political rulers ought to obey the higher law set down by God. This motive principle produced institutions, most importantly an ecclesiastical hierarchy and canon law, intended to bind rulers to moral conduct. On several occasions popes went so far as to depose kings and encourage their subjects to rebel against them because the kings had committed serious crimes against the higher law, and thus against God. Our freedom from cruel and arbitrary rule was gained on the basis of religious faith—faith in the goodness of God and the laws He had set down through revelation, rendered accessible through reason, and allowed to become operative through custom.

Our civilization’s commitment to higher law standards forbidding such practices as political murder, the slaughter of innocents, unjust war making, and the breaking of promises, produced a number of cultural institutions. These cultural institutions aimed to apply the general rules of natural law to particular circumstances, thereby establishing a relatively peaceful and moral public life. For example, customary law, developed most comprehensively as the common law of England, took the principles of canon law and applied them, through judge-made precedents, to the particular facts of disputes among various individuals within English society. Belief in the sanctity of promises, especially those between rulers and those they ruled, undergirded the development of chartered rights—binding statements such as Magna Charta, which codified the customary rights of the people—with which the ruler was not to interfere. Local associations, from townships to craft guilds, gained their own charters from the rulers, giving public recognition to their customary rights. Such chartered associations then protected local

customs from over-reaching monarchs, limiting the power of central government and fostering the spirit of political participation which is so prominent a feature of the Western tradition.

Combined, these cultural products of Western civilization's commitment to the higher law produced the limited government Americans continue to enjoy, a limited government that other cultures and civilizations often understand only partially at best. The earliest American colonists received these Western principles of limited government as an established inheritance. The Puritans journeyed from England to New England under a corporate charter from their king and managed their own affairs under that charter. Massachusetts even adopted its own Body of Liberties—a covenant binding local rulers to obey the common law and the moral law of Christianity—in 1641. The common law served as the basis for most local ordinances in America throughout the colonial period and defined the rights for which Americans fought the War of Independence. The English Parliament's decision to tax stamps and other items within the colonies and its assertion of the power to govern America arbitrarily showed the early Americans the fragility of their rights in the hands of Parliament. This breach of customary rights sparked a war in which independence was sought as the necessary means of protecting Americans' inherited way of life.

Despite the growth in government and the arbitrary rule of bureaucrats in recent decades, our form of government continues to be rooted in the higher law tradition. And while courts now may seek to deny the common law's roots in Christianity, the motive force of a higher law continues to move our people in their defense of local communities, in their insistence on the limits of legitimate government, and in their sometimes tardy but still genuine insistence

on the primacy of moral norms in judging political conduct.

If belief in a higher law has its roots primarily in Jerusalem, the striving to emulate the divine comes primarily from Athens. The pagan Greeks populated their cosmos with personifications of ideal qualities like wisdom, beauty, and martial virtue. These deities, and the art by which they were depicted, were meant to represent their essential ideas. Aphrodite, for example, shared many human vices, but poetic descriptions and statues of her sought to capture an essence: true, unadulterated beauty. In conduct, too, the Greeks sought to approach the divine through nearly superhuman performances of courage, magnanimity, and wisdom. No Greek ever became a god, it is said, but no true Greek ever gave up trying. Western civilization's commitment to beauty in art, heroism in conduct, wisdom in reasoning, and piety as a social goal grew from the peculiarly Greek drive to become like the gods. What is more, commitment to the natural law might not have gained the strength it did if not for the Greek confidence in man's ability to discern the nature of the universe and the divine impulse therein.

This striving to be like and with the divine may take many forms, not all of them salutary. Much of the peculiarly destructive force of various corrupt regimes in Western history has derived from one species or another of Western utopianism. The drive to found the perfect society here on earth, to bring about the millennium in our own time, holds immense attraction for some whose real desire is to make themselves as gods. But this mistaken vision of the higher law, according to which we seek to *become* the divine rather than to *become like* the divine, goes against the grain of Western civilization because it collapses the division between religious norms and

political conduct. Utopia's adherents claim that they are subjugating politics to religious norms, but in fact they have subjugated religious norms to their own wills, misinterpreting natural law, which provides only general rules of conduct, to be a specific code of government and private behavior, which they have been authorized to put into effect by whatever means necessary. They seek not to discover and follow God's will as best they can under given circumstances, but to create law and nature itself anew, without reference to particular circumstances, as if they themselves were gods. Still, if such utopianism is a heresy, it is unmistakably a Western heresy.

Taken in a reasonable light, however, belief in a higher, natural law written into the order of existence by God provides individuals and entire cultures with the motive necessary for them to pursue ordered liberty and a life in which social interaction and the arts are patterned after the divine order. Belief in natural law includes within it faith in the ordered character of our universe. God is omnipotent and infinite in His goodness. Thus, what He has created is good, ordered, and meaningful. The tendency of Western art to favor proportionality, order, tonality, and beauty springs from this drive to approach the divine. How so? Because each of these elements is linked to the natural order, uncovered by the artist—as Pythagoras found the proportions of tones in the length of a string and as Michelangelo said he found the forms of Moses, Mary, David, and other subjects by striking away at the block of marble before him.

God's order is embodied in nature. By

reflecting this natural order, the artist praises and approaches God. Other civilizations have sought to create beautiful things. The West discovered the power of tonality—the mathematical relationship between tones that produces wonder and delight through adherence to proportions pre-existing in nature. The West produced the architecture of Classicism, in which proportions of top to side, sides to one another, and the whole to its surroundings bring the pleasures of tonal music to the eye. The West produced the visual artistry

of Michelangelo, in which common men, heroes, saints, and even God Himself show through as both entirely material, physical beings, and as creatures of the spirit, transcending the merely human world.

Perhaps no work better illustrates the



*Western civilization in action.*

West's integration of the divine with the human than Michelangelo's *Pieta*. The Virgin Mary, larger than life, enveloped in the massive folds of her cloak, looks down in utter sadness, yet strangely serene, as she holds the cold body of her son, Jesus Christ, savior of the world. Cradled in one of his mother's arms, yet almost sliding off her lap, Christ appears small and very human in death. Yet his face, and his facial expression, are not those of a mere mortal. They communicate the perfect innocence of the Lamb of God, sacrificed for man's sins, at the same time that they radiate an eternal strength, unvanquished by death.

The integration of the material with the spiritual—of man with the divine—reached its climax with the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God as man. Prefigured in legend and in the musings of mystics, prophets, and philosophers, the

coming of the incarnate God signaled a new beginning and a transcendent purpose for man and law. Man was not and never could be a god within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But he could, and must, seek to come closer to God, to enter his presence and walk in his ways. Christianity reoriented all of Western civilization through its embodiment of life's ultimate end in reunion with the creator. But it was the particular form of reunion promised by Christianity—that of individuals, remaining individuals, but brought into full communion with God—that forged the overriding motive force of Christendom: the sanctity of each individual human being as the reflection of God's glory and grace.

One of Westerners' most peculiar character traits is their concern, evident time and again, to save the lives of strangers half a world away. The generosity of Christian nations is of course far from perfect. Indeed, at times, in its abstractness and naiveté, it may prove destructive. But Westerners take pride in acts aimed at saving strangers because they believe such acts to be virtuous—to reflect a strong, caring commitment to upholding the rights and humanity of all human beings. This commitment, which so many on the Left seek to ascribe to an empty, desiccated rationalism based on assumptions of humanity's meaningless sameness, in fact rests on distinctly Christian presumptions. Western universalism is based on the religious conviction, at the very heart of our civilization, that every life is worthy, and that every person should be given a chance to make the fundamental choices necessary to work out one's salvation.

This is not to say that choice is an appropriate end in itself. That liberal fallacy—a “humanism” bereft of its Christian basis—ignores the source of man's sanctity in his ultimate goal, God. Man has no god-like

capacity to construct a good life strictly on his own, without reference to higher goals or the needs of others. But he does have the (God-given) capacity—and duty—to choose a path in life. The right path consists of following in the ways of the Lord, pursuing a good life lived in virtue, with the hope of blessedness hereafter.

Belief in the value of every human being as a creature of God endowed with the capacity to achieve salvation pervades our civilization. For example, it lies at the root of the institutional protections of freedom of conscience. The conviction that salvation must be freely chosen and is the highest good of life, beyond even the good of the state, derives from a powerful set of fundamental Western imperatives. These include Jesus' commandment to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's, the institutional separation of church authority from the machinery of government (and, more generally, of state from society), and the witness given by countless Christian martyrs. In America, the result historically has been a plethora of local religious practices freely engaged in, and freely left behind by people of differing beliefs, seeking communities in which to engage in differing practices. Recent Supreme Court hostility toward the free expression of community-wide religious beliefs violates the most basic understanding of freedom of religion, but does not alter the fact that our civilization rests on a commitment to such public free exercise.

Belief in the sanctity of the individual also undergirds our understanding of the norms of natural law. Take the example of prohibitions against the killing of innocents. If we truly believe in the sanctity of the individual, then we must defend him against unjust punishments and violence from other men. This, after all, is one of the primordial justifications for society itself. A state that punishes the innocent, or an

army that refuses to distinguish between those who have chosen to put themselves in harm's way and those who are innocent bystanders, acts unjustly, undermining the importance of the individual's personal responsibility and society's respect for each person as a child of God.

The culture of our armed forces, our habitual way of thinking in terms of what is and is not just conduct during wartime, and even our beliefs and practices with regard to religious liberty, derive in large measure from Western civilization's Christian conviction that all lives are precious. Today's battles over abortion and euthanasia, our debates concerning "collateral damage" in wartime and over the extent to which we can "force" students to witness prayer in public schools show that this vision, while embattled and sometimes confused, remains very much alive. Advocates of abortion and euthanasia have been relatively successful in the courts, but only by denying the humanity of unborn children and old people—and the rest of us—through a calculus of pleasure and pain that reduces men to sensory machines. When fully explored, their logic is repellant, and once it becomes clear that the mantra of individual choice is not sufficient for individual *dignity*—which can only rest on faith and virtue—the tide again will turn. The sporadic bombing campaigns of the last American administration and their insistence on putting women closer and closer to harm's way out of an ideological commitment to indiscriminate equality endangered our deep American commitment to distinguishing combatants from innocent civilians. But the West's record on civilian killings—even if the desperate measures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are included—shows a unique concern to protect the innocent. We have forestalled, for now at least, the introduction of motherhood to actual combat. And parents, teach-

ers, and administrators in many local schools have shown the courage to ignore baseless judicial orders to stop praying in public, showing a continuing commitment to common faith, and to the common-sense realization that refraining from shouting "no" to a public prayer does not render one oppressed.

What, then, are we defending in this war on terrorism? We are defending American culture and Western civilization. We are defending a society in which individual liberty is key, so in our hurry to defend our families and win the war we must be careful not to give up too much of our freedom for "homeland security." At the same time, however, we must remember that ours is an *ordered* liberty aimed at producing virtuous people, not anomic chaos. Further, and most important, we are a fundamentally religious people, with a religious culture based in and shaped by a religious civilization. We should not allow our liberal elites to convince us that somehow it is religion or religious authority that is the enemy. It is true that a certain kind of religious zeal may be dangerous—that kind which refuses to recognize the central role of free will and conscience in salvation. Yet our nation was founded on such concerns for religious conscience, and freedom of religious expression in this country flourished under various forms of state establishment of religion well into the nineteenth century. Surely it can survive a renewal of concern for faith and virtue in our public life. We had best hope that this is the case. As culture grows from the cult, its institutions, beliefs, and practices forming over time from the relationships established through common worship, so civilization rests on our continued willingness to feed the springs of faith from which flow the human motivation to build, repair, and maintain the structure of our lives.