

Christopher Shannon

Modernity's Saving Angel?

Democratic Capitalism and Its Discontents
by Brian C. Anderson. ISI Books, 2007.

If totalitarianism did not exist, it would have to be invented. Since it has been defeated, it needs to be resurrected. It is the indispensable enemy against which democratic capitalism asserts its unqualified legitimacy. Brian Anderson's *Democratic Capitalism and Its Discontents* is yet another exercise in the ritual exorcism of modernity's demon, and yet another brief for its saving angel. Anderson, editor of the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*, offers the best possible defense of democratic capitalism in that, as his title suggests, he concedes its limitations, particularly with respect to its account of the moral life.

Following in a school of thought stretching from Alexis de Tocqueville to Michael Novak, Anderson argues that religion, specifically Christianity and Judaism, has an essential role to play in providing moral guidance and restraint to a social and political system that holds the freedom of the individual to be the foundational principle of social order. An excellent overview of the general conservative or neoconservative argument for ordered liberty, Anderson's book may strike advanced readers as somewhat derivative. To his credit, however, Anderson introduces the work of several important French thinkers—such as Bertrand de Jouvenal, Marcel Gauchet,

and Pierre Manent—who have yet to receive their due in American conservative circles. Still, the book betrays the fatal flaw of all such arguments championing the regime of modern liberty: it introduces religion as a transcendent reference point only to confine religion within strict limits set by democratic capitalism itself.

The book is more a collection of essays than a sustained argument. That said, the individual chapters stand nicely on their own, each clearly written, tightly focused, and within the limits of Anderson's overall framework, well argued. In his opening chapter, "Capitalism and the Suicide of Culture," Anderson stares discontent right in the face. Citing the work of the late French historian François Furet, he notes that Western modernity is unique among world civilizations in its ability to inspire self-loathing among the very people who at one level derive the most benefit from its animating ideas and institutions. Anderson writes that hatred of the bourgeoisie "is a tale as old as modernity itself . . .

Christopher Shannon teaches history at Christendom College. A new and revised edition of his *Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in Modern American Social Thought* was recently published by the University of Scranton Press.

but it is jarring to reflect on how much ire has come not from aristocratic revenants or fiery proles, but from the cerebral sons of businessmen.”

The generally egalitarian ethos of modernity produced two major incitements to discontent. On the one hand, the leveling of social hierarchies served to undermine traditional moral hierarchies; on the other, modernity's initial affirmation of political equality bred utopian schemes to achieve economic and social equality as well, schemes that served as guiding ideals to fill the void left by the moral indeterminacy resulting from modernity's initial assault on traditional hierarchies. In these discontents, Anderson finds the source of the cult of revolutionary violence stretching from the French Revolution in the eighteenth century to the various strains of communism and fascism in the twentieth century. He sees this revolutionary tradition alive and well in contemporary left-wing opposition to globalization, particularly as expounded by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their controversial best-selling book, *Empire* (2000). He sees a similar, if distinct, violent discontent in radical Islam. As secular Marxists and anarchists look beyond capitalist modernity to a utopian socialist future, so Islamic fundamentalists look behind it to recover a utopian religious past. Against these two extremes stands democratic capitalism, the golden mean and the last best hope for human freedom.

Marxist radicals and Islamic fundamentalists might seem like strange bedfellows, but defenders of theoretical modernity have long seen the extremes of left and right as of a piece. Anderson writes in this tradition, referring to communism as a secular religion—a label that itself betrays a secular bias against religion, in effect equating religion and totalitarianism. Of course, Anderson makes no simple

equation and actually insists that religion of some sort is essential to the success of democratic capitalism. Here, Anderson follows Tocqueville's argument in *Democracy in America*. Religious traditions and institutions provide egalitarian capitalist societies with the moral and spiritual stability otherwise deprived them by the destruction of traditional hierarchies; they inculcate the moral discipline necessary for success in a high-paced, competitive capitalist marketplace; and they foster a cooperative ethic of service that provides a voluntary social safety net for those who fail to succeed in the market. In these ways, religion quells the discontents of modernity, providing the moral and spiritual supports necessary to ensure the healthy functioning of a stable, rational social order.

Anderson's Tocquevillian rehabilitation of religion appears fresh only when set against the profoundly antireligious secularism that triumphed in American liberal political culture during the 1960s. Anderson successfully exposes the emptiness, indeed, the nihilism, of secular modernity in both its soft liberal (e.g. John Rawls) and hard radical (Jean Paul Sartre) forms; he also successfully reviews the failure of policies issuing from this world view, particularly the welfare state and various versions of the planned economy. He fails to acknowledge, however, that his alternative has quite a history of failure behind it as well.

As Raymond Williams showed long ago in his classic *Culture and Society* (1958), Victorian society banked its future on the ability of moral “culture” (the realm of art and religion) to tame amoral “society” (the capitalist marketplace). Anderson's own account of contemporary European culture suggests the historic failure of this project in Europe, yet drawing on Tocqueville he treats this culture/society dy-

namism as a uniquely American phenomenon, and a uniquely American success. Such nihilism as flourishes in American elite and popular culture is presented simply as an alien import, a secular corruption of a balance that once worked in America and we are assured will work again. Drawing on Daniel Bell's classic reflections on the "cultural contradictions of capitalism," Anderson concedes that consumer capitalism may indeed incite immoral behavior that threatens the stability of the social order; still, he insists there is no necessary link between capitalism and nihilism. A necessary link, perhaps not. A historical link, undeniably. If liberalism and communism are to be judged by their historical record, it would seem only fair to subject the Tocquevillian ideal to the same scrutiny.

Anderson is at best very selective in his account of the real world embodiment of these ideals. Following his opening two chapters covering the dark side of modernity ("The Bourgeois Prospect"), he moves on to three chapters covering "The American Difference." Here Anderson trots out familiar statistics about the high percentage of Americans who believe in God and attend church services. The substance of belief is irrelevant; the simple fact of belief is enough for Anderson to assert that America possesses a moral order capable of providing the framework for ordered liberty. By Anderson's own account, however, American religion reflects liberty at least as much as it provides order. The ge-

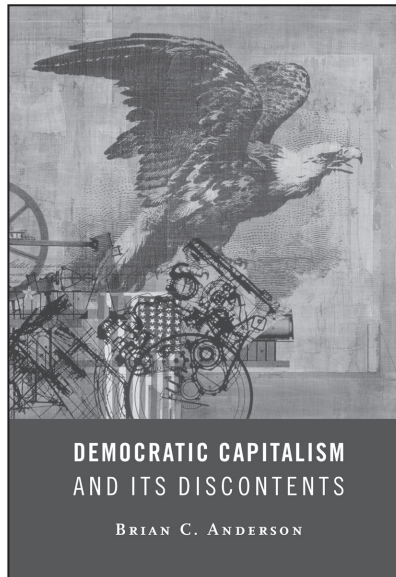
nius of American religion lies in disestablishment. Citing the work of Massimo Introvigne, Anderson credits the vitality of American religion to the market itself: "In a free market, people get more interested in the product. It is true for religion just as it is true for cars."

That Anderson can quote a celebration of the commodification of religion with

no critical comment speaks volumes about his understanding of the real place of religion in a democratic capitalist society. Religion serves the social order by mirroring "the hypercompetitive American economy," while still offering some residual connection to a transcendent authority capable of inspiring a respect for limits. The truth of religion is irrelevant, or at best a purely private matter; somehow, reli-

gion will nonetheless provide support for a public morality to which all must submit. Against Anderson, I would argue that the privatization of morality follows quite naturally, and necessarily, from the privatization of religion. Anderson's wish to return to some nineteenth-century middle ground in this process seems naïve, the product of a distinctly American historical provincialism.

To his credit, Anderson provides resources for looking beyond the nineteenth century. The final section of the book, "Recto/Verso," explores the work of several major modern political theorists across the political spectrum. Along with fairly conventional critiques of Rawls and Sartre, Anderson provides a provocative in-



roduction to the work of some modern French thinkers who bring to these issues a deep historical sense so often lacking in American political writing. A work such as Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World* (1997), for example, suggests that compared with the thickly religious societies of ancient and medieval Europe, a "religious believer in a democratic society like the United States, who can choose what to believe from a bazaar of traditional and nontraditional beliefs, already inhabits a postreligious landscape." Drawing on the work of Pierre Manent, Anderson argues provocatively that "the history of modern society is about the desire to flee the political power of revealed religion." Bertrand de Jouvenel's sweeping histories of political thought emphasize that the church's political power was in fact the most effective check on the rise of the absolutist state.

Anderson's treatment of these thinkers suggests fruitful areas for new engagement with premodern church/state relations. The "two-swords" ideal of medieval Christendom divided secular and sacred authority in a way unimaginable in the ancient pagan world—or, for that matter, in the modern totalitarianisms. Still, religion retained a public authority that enabled it to exercise robust moral guidance over a warrior culture all too willing to equate right with might. The example would seem to be an instructive one. But Anderson ultimately pulls back from any serious rethinking of the modern regime: religion, he insists, must reject the temptation to establish itself as an independent political power. It should content itself, instead, simply with instilling "vital spiritual energies into our social order by pointing beyond the individual." The absolute monarchs of the seventeenth century would not have disagreed.