NATIONALISM AND THE FUTURE OF WESTERN FREEDOM

A conflict is brewing over the shape of the international order. It centers around an idea—a biblical idea—long thought discredited by political elites.

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Britain's June 23 referendum on independence was the most important vote in a democratic nation in a generation. Many Americans assume that events in Western Europe can't have that kind of significance, and in fact the U.S. media paid scant attention to the upheaval taking place in the UK right up until the official returns showing an impending British exit (or "Brexit") from the European Union.

But in the aftermath, all this changed. The fear, outrage, and despair that Britain's vote for independence provoked in elite opinion in Europe and in many circles in the United States points to a political event of massive proportions. Even before the vote, a campaign orchestrated by the Cameron government sought to play upon the sense of trepidation that had become evident among a portion of the electorate. The government's message, Douglas Murray wrote, was "unmistakable":

> With Brexit, the country [would] be taking a leap into the unknown with the possibility of becoming a basket case and causing a world war. Memories of the mid-1970s were conjured up: the three-day work week, the uncollected rubbish, the unburied dead.

And that was the *Tories* speaking. In the aftermath of the vote, much the same message could be heard from all sides of the political establishment in tones that were, if anything, even more hysterical.

But the principal revelation here—and the phenomenon to keep our eyes on—is not only the fact that, for many both in the UK and elsewhere, the prospect of British independence is genuinely an object of dread. It is also the countervailing fact that the possible re-emergence of a free and independent Britain has rallied profound admiration and enthusiasm among countless others. The fissure

between these powerfully held and irreconcilable views was there earlier. But Brexit has turned the floodlights on it, exposing, so that all can readily see, the deepest fault line in the politics of Western nations today. It is along this line that the bitterest and most fateful political battles in our time are likely to be fought.

What is this all about? Many commentators have pointed to the Brexit vote, and this year's American presidential campaign, as contests between policies favoring economic "globalization" and those informed by a more protectionist and insular "nationalism." And there is much to be said for that characterization. But what divides the emerging camps also runs quite a bit deeper than is suggested by framing things in terms of one set of economic and foreign-policy preferences against another. What we are seeing is the beginning of a struggle over the character of the international political order itself.

For 350 years, Western peoples have lived in a world in which national independence and self-determination were seen as foundational principles. Indeed, these things were held to be among the most precious human possessions, and the basis of all of our freedoms. Since World War II, however, these intuitions have been gradually attenuated and finally even discredited, especially among academics and intellectuals, media opinion-makers, and business and political elites. Today, many in the West have come to regard an intense personal loyalty to the national state and its right to chart an independent course as something not only unnecessary but morally suspect. They no longer see national loyalties and traditions as necessarily providing a sound basis for determining the laws we live by, for regulating the economy or making decisions about defense and security, for establishing public norms concerning religion or education, or for deciding who gets to live in what part of the world.

But those who have made this transition in fundamental political orientation have done so without making sure that everyone else was on board. Millions of people, especially outside the centers of elite opinion, still hold fast to the old understanding that the independence and self-determination of one's nation hold the key to a life of honor and freedom. These are people who believe that no one ever consulted them about giving up on the freedom of their nation to protect its people, their interests, and their traditions. And when people think they weren't consulted about giving up such precious commodities, they are apt to respond in dramatic, harsh, and often violent ways.

This means that the clash of fundamental political assumptions we are watching unfold is already much more extreme than has been fully understood. As what is at stake comes better into focus, political parties will realign. Entire countries will realign. The Brexit vote is only the first shot fired in a protracted conflict that will play itself out throughout the West and elsewhere. A look at how this came to be can help us better to understand where we are headed.

I. Nation versus Empire

For centuries, the politics of Western nations have been characterized by a struggle between two antithetical visions of world order: an order of free and independent nations, each pursuing the political good in accordance with its own traditions and understanding; and an order of peoples united under a single regime of law, promulgated and maintained by a single supra-national authority. The first vision is today most clearly represented by nations like India, Israel, Japan, Norway, South Korea, and Switzerland—and now by Britain, perhaps to be followed by others. The second vision is held by much of the leadership of the European Union, which affirmed its commitment to the concept of an "ever closer union" of peoples in the Stuttgart Declaration of 1981 and has proceeded since then to introduce EU laws and currency into most member nations, as well as requiring the free movement of populations among most member states.

The conflict between these two visions is as old as the West itself. The idea that the political order should be based on independent nations was an important feature of ancient Israelite thought as reflected in the Hebrew Bible (or "Old Testament"). And although Western civilization, for most of its history, has been dominated by dreams of universal empire, the presence of the Bible at the heart of this civilization has ensured that the idea of the self-determining, independent nation would be revived time and again.

Why is the Hebrew Bible so concerned with the independence of nations? The world of Israel's prophets was dominated by a succession of imperial powers: Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, and Persia, each giving way to the next. Despite their differences, each of these empires sought to impose a universal political order on mankind as a whole, the gods having sent them to suppress needless disputes among peoples and to create a unified international realm in which men could live together in peace and prosperity. "None hungered in my years or thirsted in them," the Pharaoh Amenemhet I wrote a few centuries before Abraham. "Men dwelled in peace through that which I wrought." And this was no idle boast. By ending warfare in vast regions and harnessing their populations to productive agricultural work, imperial powers were in fact able to bring to millions a relatively reliable peace and an end to the threat of starvation.

No wonder then that the imperial rulers of the ancient world saw it as their task, in the words of the Babylonian king Hamurabi, to "bring the four quarters of the world to obedience." That obedience, after all, was what ensured salvation from war, disease, and starvation.

And yet, despite the obvious economic advantages of an Egyptian or Babylonian peace that would unify humanity, the Bible was born out of a deep-seated opposition to that very aim. To Israel's prophets, Egypt was "the house of bondage," and they spared no words in deploring the bloodshed and cruelty

involved in imperial conquest and the imperial manner of governing, its recourse to slavery and murder and its expropriation of women and property. All of this, the Israelite prophets argued, stemmed from Egypt's idolatry—from its submission to gods who would justify any sacrifice so long as it advanced the extension of the imperial realm of peace and kept the production of grain running at maximum capacity.

Was there a viable alternative to universal empire? The ancient Near East had much experience with localized political power in the form of city-states. But these were helpless before imperial armies and the ideology of universal empire that motivated them. It is in the Hebrew Bible that we find the first sustained presentation of a different possibility: a political order based on the independence of a nation living within limited borders alongside other independent nations.

By "nation," I mean a people or group of peoples that are united—or that are capable of being united—around a shared history, language, or religion, permitting them to act effectively as a body for the common defense and other large-scale enterprises. The Bible systematically promotes the idea that members of a nation (Hebrew, *goy*) should regard one another as "brothers," and the Mosaic law directs all Israelites to join in establishing what would today be called a national state. The king of such a state would be drawn "from among your brothers." Its prophets, too, would be "from among you, from among your brothers." And so would its priests, appointed to guard the traditional laws of the nation and teach them to the king "so that his thoughts not be lifted above his brothers." Moreover, Moses sets boundaries for Israel, instructing his people to keep their hands off of the lands of neighboring kingdoms like Moav, Edom, and Ammon, which deserve their own independence. As he tells them in God's name:

> Take good heed of yourselves therefore. Meddle not with [the children of Esau], for I will not give you of their land. No, not so much as a foot's breadth. Because I have given Mt. Seir to Esau for a possession. . . . Do not harass Moav, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the children of Lot for a possession. . . . And when you come near, opposite the children of Ammon, harass them not, nor contend with them, for I will not give you of the land of the children of Ammon any possession, for I have given it to the children of Lot for a possession.

Nor are these passages unique. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we find that the political aspiration of the prophets of Israel is not empire but a free nation living in justice and peace amid other free nations.

The Bible thus puts a new political conception on the table: a state of a single people that is united, self-governing, and uninterested in bringing its neighbors under its own rule. This state is governed not by foreigners responsible to a ruler

in a distant land but by kings and governors, priests and prophets, drawn from the ranks of the nation itself: elites that are, for just this reason, thought to be better able to stay in touch with the needs of their own people, their "brothers," especially the less fortunate among them.

In addition, because the Israelite king is merely one of the people, and not the representative of some abstract universal ambition, his powers can be circumscribed to prevent abuse. Unlike the kings of Egypt or Babylonia, the Israelite king under the Mosaic constitution is not empowered to make the laws, which are the heritage of his nation and not subject to his whim. Nor does he have the power to appoint the priesthood, thereby making law and religion subservient to him. In the same way, the Mosaic law limits the king's right to tax and enslave the people, just as the limitations on Israel's borders prevent the king from embracing the dream of universal conquest.

It is important to notice that the Israelites' conception of the nation has nothing to do with biology, or what we call race. For biblical nations, everything depends on a shared understanding of history, language, and religion that is passed from parents to children, but which outsiders can join as well. Thus the book of Exodus teaches that there were many Egyptians who attached themselves to the Hebrew slaves in fleeing Egypt, and that they received the Ten Commandments (more accurately translated as the "Ten Precepts") at Sinai with the rest of Israel. Similarly, Moses invites the Midianite sheikh Jethro to join the Jewish people. And Ruth the Moabite becomes part of Israel by declaring "your people will be my people and your God will be my God"—her son being the forefather of King David himself.

But the ability of Israel to bring foreign-born individuals into its ranks always depends on these individuals' willingness to accept Israel's God, its view of history, and its laws. Without embracing these elements of the national identity, foreigners will not be able to contribute to Israel's cohesion and strength in times of hardship. They will not be part of the Israelite nation.

II. The Fall of the Idea of Universal Christian Empire

The Jews were not the only people to recognize the potential of a national form of political organization as a bulwark against the tyranny of universal empire. The Greek historian Polybius blamed the Greek city-states for not having acted as a unified nation in their lost struggle with Rome, and hoped for the future establishment of a united Greece. A Greek national state had never existed in history, but Polybius had before him the examples of the Armenians and of the Jews under the Maccabees—two peoples that, in his lifetime, revolted successfully against the Seleucid-Greek empire and established independent national states for their peoples.

Throughout much of the history of Western peoples, however, this ideal of national independence did not predominate. The Christian Church eventually succeeded in establishing itself as the state religion of Rome, in the process adopting the Roman dream of universal empire, as well as the project of Roman law, which aspired to provide a single framework for a *pax romana* ("Roman peace") extending to all nations. For a thousand years, Christianity thus aligned itself, not with the ideal of setting the nations free, as had been proposed by the Israelite prophets, but with much the same aspiration that had given rise to imperial Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia: the aspiration of establishing a universal empire of peace and prosperity.

Regarding itself as the "Catholic" or universal church, the Roman Church was allied, in theory and often in practice as well, with the German Holy Roman emperors, who were entrusted with establishing the universal Christian empire. In this, Roman Catholic political thought paralleled that of the Muslim caliphs, who likewise believed they had been charged with bringing peace and prosperity to the world under the rule of a universal empire of their own.

But Christian political thought differed from that of Islam in at least one crucial respect: Christianity had the Hebrew Bible, with its vision of the justice of a world of independent nations. This vision never ceased to cause trouble for the idea of universal Catholic empire, even if many Christian thinkers were hesitant to embrace the Old Testament too closely. Indeed, it was the presence of the Hebrew Bible in the Christian canon that shaped the peculiar history of French Catholicism, which took on a national character modeled on the biblical Davidic kingdom and stubbornly resisted the control of popes and emperors. It shaped, as well, the unique national-religious traditions of the English, Poles, and Czechs well before the Reformation.

Thus, when Protestantism emerged in the 16th century, along with the invention of the printing press and the widespread circulation of the Bible in vernacular languages, the new call for freedom to interpret Scripture without the intervening authority of the Catholic Church was not a matter of religious doctrine alone. Especially under the influence of Old Testament-oriented thinkers like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, Protestantism embraced and quickly became tied to the unique national traditions of various peoples chafing against ideas and institutions that they regarded as foreign to them.

The revolt of the Dutch against their Spanish overlords, for example, pitted a Calvinist insurrection against Catholic empire, culminating in the Dutch declaring themselves an independent nation in 1581. The Scottish national covenants of this period, modeled on the Jewish national covenants of the Bible, were similarly motivated. The English defeat of the Spanish invasion fleet in 1588 was likewise an assertion of the freedom of an English-Anglican nation to reject Catholicism. In these and other cases, the self-image of Protestant peoples as possessing a right to independence and self-determination was explicitly modeled on biblical

Israel's effort to wrest its national and religious freedom from the dictates of Egyptian and Babylonian universal empire.

The Thirty Years' War, culminating in the peace of Westphalia in 1648, is often presented as a "war of religion" fought between Protestants and Catholics. But this is not quite right. The war is better understood as pitting the emerging national states of France, the Netherlands, and Sweden (nations that, respectively, were Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran) against German and Spanish armies devoted to the idea that universal empire reflected God's will and that it alone could bring true well-being to mankind. It was in the Thirty Years' War that the concept of a universal Christian empire, which had held sway over the West's political imagination for thirteen centuries, was decisively defeated.

III. The Rise of the Protestant Construction

The Westphalia treaties gave a new, Protestant construction to the West. Although the settlement was not officially accepted by the Catholic Church— Pope Innocent X called it "null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, and devoid of meaning for all time"—in practice it re-founded the entire political order roughly along lines that had been articulated by the English and Dutch Protestants in the previous century. Under this Protestant construction, the political, religious, and cultural life of Europe was rebuilt upon two principles:

1. *Legitimate Government as Protector of the People.* First, the king or ruler, if he is to rule a nation by right, must devote himself to the protection of his people in their life, family, and property, to justice in the courts and the maintenance of the sabbath, and to the public recognition of the one God— roughly, the biblical Ten Commandments given at Sinai, which Luther and Calvin regarded as a natural law that could be known by all men. These precepts were seen as providing the minimum requirements for a life of personal freedom and dignity for all. A government that could not protect these things would have failed in its most basic obligations to the well-being of the people and would have to be replaced.

2. *The Right of National Self-Determination.* Second, nations that were cohesive and strong enough to secure their political independence would henceforth be regarded as possessing what later came to be called the right of self-determination, by which was meant the right to govern themselves under their own national constitutions and churches, without interference from foreign powers. Thus, while it was accepted that there exist natural minimum requirements for maintaining a civilized society, and that these, in line with the first principle, were binding upon all governments, it was not expected that all nations would become as one in their thoughts, laws, or way of life. Even the

most optimistic speeches of the biblical prophets recognized that the diversity of nations was a permanent feature of mankind, and that differences would remain in the ways civilized peoples pursued the basic requirements of freedom and dignity.

In the context of 17th-century Europe, this meant that some nations would be monarchies while others would be republics. It meant that different nations would have different forms of national religion, as well as varying provisions for the protection of minority religions. It also meant that different nations would manifest different degrees of personal freedom in various areas. The Dutch Republic, for example, might offer an exceptional degree of personal freedom of expression, with the result that science, trade, and publishing would naturally flow to Amsterdam from other nations more skeptical of the value of such openness. What made this possible, however, was not a doctrine enumerating a list of "universal rights." Rather, "the ancient customs and privileges" of the Dutch people themselves were said to be responsible for their country's special regard for intellectual and religious freedom.

The two principles of the Protestant construction were not entirely new. The idea that a ruler must serve as the protector of his people had existed in various forms throughout the history of Christendom. Already in the 12th century, Catholic political theorists like Honorius of Augsburg and John of Salisbury, relying on the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy and the descriptions of the Israelite kingdoms in the books of Samuel and Kings, had articulated this explicitly. But the second principle—permitting each nation to determine for itself what constitutes a legitimate ruler, a legitimate church, and appropriate laws and liberties—brought the Christian world for the first time into dialogue with the biblical vision of an order of independent nations. And it was this principle that set the world free.

The moral minimum of the Ten Commandments and the biblical ideal of national freedom are designed to reinforce one another. In the eyes of the prophets of Israel, a nation whose rulers will protect their people and pursue their well-being is capable of an extraordinary degree of internal loyalty, pride, and cohesiveness in the face of hardship. Internal brotherhood and justice, the prophets believed, is the necessary prerequisite for national longevity and for the capacity to resist foreign encroachment.

Yet, at the same time, the two biblical principles stand in tension with each other. On the one hand, the idea that there are natural standards of legitimacy higher than the dictates of any particular government means that nations cannot rightly do whatever they please; they are always subject to judgment by God and man, and this necessarily makes government conditional. On the other hand, the principle of national freedom strengthens and protects the unique institutions, traditions, laws, and ideals of a given nation against the claim that they must be overturned in the name of doctrines being promoted by the advocates of a universal church or empire. While the existence of a moral minimum is recognized, interpreting how this minimum will be expressed is taken to be a right

of every independent nation, each approaching the issue from a unique perspective rooted in its own historical circumstances, experience, and insight.

The tension inherent in maintaining both principles of the Protestant construction imparted a unique dynamism to the nations of Europe, releasing a storm of dormant energies and fostering a stunning degree of experiment and innovation in government and theology, economics and science. By permitting a diversity of constitutional and religious arrangements within different countries, the Protestant order also provided national laboratories for developing and testing the institutions and freedoms we now associate with the Western world. And the contest among rival national perspectives went far beyond political theory and theology. English empirical science was fueled by outrage over the deductive character of the Cartesian method—which the French, in turn, insisted was the only truly "rational" way to advance science. German philosophy likewise thrived on the belief that British empiricism was a grand catastrophe, and that Immanuel Kant's idealism would save us all.

The same could be said for virtually any field, including the arts and culture, in which European civilization made significant advances. In each case, rival achievements and points of view, recognized at the time as being distinctly national in character, were proposed as being best for humanity as a whole—spurring others to imitate what they saw as successful even as they incited renewed efforts to rebuild defeated approaches more intelligently so that they might fight another day.

None of this is to say that post-Westphalian Europe was some kind of idyll. The Christian national states were constantly resorting to war over territories and trade, a habit that cannot but strike us as a willingness to accept gratuitous bloodshed. These states—including Britain and the United States—also long maintained unconscionable racialist arrangements and institutions, and placed a variety of barriers before the participation of Jews in national life. Moreover, even as the English, Dutch, and French insisted upon the Westphalian principle of national independence and self-determination within the European context, they were all too ready to devise reasons for maintaining colonial empires based on the conquest and subjugation of foreign peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. And one could easily add to the list of practices from that period that we would and should find objectionable.

Yet for all its evident shortcomings, the argument for the international order introduced into Europe in early modernity remains strong. As an order based on the principle of national freedom, it gave unprecedentedly beneficial political and religious form to the Western nations: a form that provided a sound basis for the eventual remediation of many of its deficiencies. In time, the Protestant principle of national freedom did put an end to Europe's overseas empires. And in so doing, it brought about the founding of new national states around the world,

among them the United States of America and, perhaps most remarkably of all, a restored Jewish state of Israel.

IV. The Liberal Challenge

In August 1941, several months before America's entry into World War II, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt signed what became known as the "Atlantic Charter," which reaffirmed the principle of national freedom ("the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live") as the very heart of the Western powers' vision for the postwar world. At this critical juncture, the Protestant construction remained the unquestioned basis for the international order as it was understood by the leaders of the Western nations. The great challenge before their eyes was to defeat the Nazis and the Soviets in their efforts to overthrow that Protestant order. If they could achieve this, it seemed that all would be well.

But the defeat of the Nazis, and ultimately also of the Soviets, did not bring about the expected restoration of the West's Protestant construction. In fact, at least since the end of World War II, the future of that construction has only grown increasingly uncertain. We can see this in the progressive abandonment of the view that family, sabbath, and public recognition of God are institutions upheld by legitimate government and minimum requirements of a just society. And we can see it in the sharp decline of concern for safeguarding the independence of nations and the right of self-determination as the most effective barriers to the tyranny of universal empire.

What is driving this crisis is severe pressure from an emerging alternative to the Protestant political order: an alternative that can be called the liberal construction of the West. Although the final victory of this new order is still far off, institutions and individuals committed to it have grown sufficiently powerful to have put the entire Protestant construction in doubt. In recent years, we have seen continental Europe reconstituted under a multinational regime, and in America a series of devastating blows have been dealt to the Protestant construal of what it means for a legitimate government to protect the well-being of its people. With these dizzying victories in hand, the rise of the liberal construction of the West is the most important development in our political world today. Its only rival for this title is, perhaps, the simultaneous rise of radical Islam.

What is this liberal construction? I'll focus on a few of its most important characteristics, some of them more familiar than others.

To begin with, unlike the Protestant construction, which thrived on the tension between the two fundamental principles of a biblically-founded moral minimum and national freedom, the liberal construction of the West is premised on the idea

that there is ultimately only one principle at the base of legitimate political order: namely, individual freedom. A classical and still highly influential source for this idea is the modern world's most famous liberal manifesto, John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government.* That landmark document, published in 1689*,* opens with the assertion that all human individuals are born "perfectly free" and "perfectly equal," and goes on to describe them as pursuing life, liberty, and property in a world of transactions based on consent. From this basis, Locke builds his model of political life and theory of government.

Locke himself was a product of the Protestant construction, and his work was intended to strengthen it, not to undermine it. Nevertheless, in fashioning his theory he downplayed or entirely omitted essential characteristics of human nature and human society. In the *Second Treatise* Locke abstracts away the intellectual or cultural inheritance that one receives from being raised in a particular family, community, nation, and religious tradition. He ignores the mutual responsibilities that are intrinsic to inherited or adopted membership in such collectives, establishing far-reaching demands of loyalty and honor; and the way in which the inevitable challenges and hardships of human life reinforce these responsibilities and demands and turn them into often immovable features of the moral and political landscape. The result is Locke's shocking depreciation of even the most basic bonds that had been thought to hold society together.

For example, is there any reason to believe that brothers born to the same parents have any obligations to each other? Do grandparents have any obligations to their grandchildren, or grandchildren to their grandparents? Since such basic family relationships do not come into being by way of consent, Locke's model generates no obligations of the kind we normally associate with the family. Similarly, the government that is brought into being by the social contract of the *Second Treatise* is eerily without borders or boundaries, without an awareness of any responsibility to unborn future generations or even of any responsibility to bring children into the world in the first place, and without a concern to honor the memory of generations past who sacrificed to bring the present into being. Locke's free and equal individuals have not consented to any of these things, which means that institutions such as the national state, community, family, and the church—institutions that set borders and boundaries, establish ties to generations future and past, and offer a glimpse beyond the present to something higher—appear to have no reason for existing at all. Without intending it, the framework provided by Locke's *Treatise* makes the Protestant order exceedingly difficult to explain, much less justify.

So utterly unrealistic is the world described in Locke's *Second Treatise*, a world in which so much of what constitutes normal political life has been reduced to the demands of individuals freely pursuing property, that it resembles a veritable dream-world. Locke's first readers were deeply troubled by this. But the radical deficiency of his account has gradually ceased to be recognized as a problem, and Western intellectual life is now inundated with follow-up works—from Kant's

Perpetual Peace (1795) to Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1972) —that tirelessly elaborate this dream-world, working and reworking the liberal vision of human beings freely pursuing property on the basis of consent and without borders.

At some point, liberal political and economic theory and international law crushed the life out of more realistic, competing accounts, becoming the virtually unquestioned framework for what an educated person needs to know about the political world. With a few exceptions, the most noisily discussed debates among rival views in political theory (for example, between John Rawls and Robert Nozick) or in economics (John Maynard Keynes versus Friedrich Hayek) or in jurisprudence (between Ronald Dworkin and H.L.A. Hart) have, for two or three generations now, been conducted in terms largely internal to the same Lockean paradigm.

University-educated political and intellectual elites in America and Europe, whether they think of themselves as "liberals" or as "conservatives," are now for the most part sequestered within this liberal frame. Ask a sophisticated, thoughtful person in politics or economics or law today to mount a defense of the institution of the national state, or of the traditional family, or of public recognition of God's kingship, and you immediately see how unfamiliar these things have become, and how foreign they are to the terms in which members of our elites are accustomed to conceptualizing the world. This isn't just a matter of disagreeing with the proposition that such things are vital to maintaining a civilized political order. It is rather a matter of being so immersed in the new liberal construction as to be unable even to imagine what a non-Lockean view of reality might look like.

Having been initiated into this paradigm, educated people can now fill their days working in an endless array of liberal projects that make it seem real: the burgeoning political program of European unification; the expansion of unfettered free trade and the free immigration of populations; the transitioning of business enterprises into "multinational" corporations that serve the global economy rather than any particular national interest; the subjugation of nations to an ever-expanding body of international law; the agitation for a universal regime of human rights through international NGOs and the UN's Human Rights Council in Geneva; the homogenization of the world's universities by way of an accelerating system of international standards and peer review. All of these things are pursued as a matter of course by university-trained Lockeans, hardly aware that there might be intelligent and decent people whose estimation of the worth of such enterprises is drastically different from their own.

But despite the great success these projects have had in changing our world, and despite their genuine worth in certain areas (such as economics), the Lockean account remains what it was: a shockingly insufficient basis for understanding political reality. Those factors in human political and social life that

have no place in the liberal paradigm have not been eliminated. They have only been denied and suppressed. And like Marxists before them, liberals will discover that while denial is easy, suppression comes at an escalating cost.

V. The New Universalism

Until not very long ago, support for the independence and self-determination of nations was an indication of a progressive politics and a generous spirit. It was not only American independence that well-meaning and decent people celebrated each year with fireworks and music, parades, church bells, and barbeques. As late as the middle of the 20th century, the establishment of self-determining national states like Greece, Italy, and Poland, no less than Israel, India, and Ethiopia, was widely hailed as a victory for morality and enlightened opinion, and associated with progressive intellectual and political figures like John Stuart Mill and Woodrow Wilson.

But at the same time, a tidal shift in attitudes toward expressions of national and religious particularism was getting under way in Europe and the United States. As the West wrestled to make sense of the monstrous crimes that German forces had committed against the Jews and other groups and peoples, it was impossible to miss the connection between Nazi race theories, which provided the normative framework for these crimes, and anti-Semitic themes that had been ubiquitous in German thought going back at least to Luther. Soon enough, the German government's decision to murder the world's Jews was being attributed—first by leftists and Communists, and then also by liberals—to German "nationalism." By the 1960s at the latest, the revulsion against Nazi genocide, a category into which other evils such as racial segregation in the American south and South African apartheid were often assimilated, was moving liberal elites toward an identification of national or religious particularism of any kind with Nazism and racism.

This line of thought was never altogether coherent. Despite the appearance of the word "national" in the name of the German National Socialist party, Hitler was no advocate of nationalism. He was a harsh critic not only of the Protestant construction in general but of the institution of the national state in particular, which he saw as an effete contrivance of the English and French and vastly inferior to the Germans' historic imperial legacy. In place of the order of national states, he set out to establish a Third Reich that expressly drew its inspiration from the "First Reich"—that is, from the German Holy Roman Empire with its universal aspirations and thousand-year reign. Hitler's Germany was thus an imperial state in every sense, seeking to put an end to the principle of the national independence and the self-determination of peoples once and for all.

Nor is there any sense in which Germany's effort to destroy the Jews can be seen as resulting from the Westphalian principle of national self-determination. The Nazi extermination program, directed at all of the Jews in Poland, Russia, and the rest of Europe and North Africa, was not a national policy but a global one, exerting influence as far away as the Shanghai Jewish ghetto established by the Japanese at the Nazis' behest. It could not have been conceived or attempted outside the context of Hitler's attempt to revive and perfect longstanding German aspirations to universal empire.

These things were perfectly clear during the war itself. In their radio broadcasts, the United States and Britain consistently emphasized that as an alliance of independent nations, their aim was to restore the independence and self-determination of national states throughout Europe. And in the end, it was American, British, and Russian nationalism—even Stalin had abandoned Marxist claptrap about "world revolution" in favor of open appeals to Russian patriotism—that defeated Germany's bid for world empire.

But none of this seemed significant to Western liberals, who moved swiftly after the war toward the view that, in light of German atrocities, national independence could no longer be accepted as the basis for the international order. Among the most ardent of the new anti-nationalists was the West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, who repeatedly called for the creation of a federal European union, arguing that only the elimination of the national state could prevent a repetition of the horrors of the war. As he wrote in his book *World Indivisible with Liberty and Justice for All* (English edition, 1955):

> The age of national states has come to an end. . . . We in Europe must break ourselves of the habit of thinking in terms of national states. . . . European agreements . . . are intended to make war among European nations impossible in the future. . . . If the idea of European community should survive for 50 years, there will never again be a European war.

According to this way of thinking, the answer to the overwhelming evil of Nazi-era Germany was to dismantle the system of independent nation states that had given Germany the right to make decisions for itself, and to replace it with an overarching European union that would be capable of restraining Germany. Take away German self-determination, and you would bring prosperity and peace to Europe.

The argument that eliminating the national states of Europe was meant to "restrain" Germany is repeated endlessly in Europe today. But it is closer to being a good joke than competent political analysis. The German-speaking peoples of central Europe never really had a national state to speak of. There was no German history of national unity and independence comparable to that of Britain, France, or the Netherlands. Those West European nations had not feared the

Germans because of their nationalism, but because of their universalism and imperialism—their aim of bringing peace to Europe by unifying it under a German emperor. It was this tradition that had made it so easy for Kant, the preeminent German philosopher of enlightenment, to assert that the only rational form of government would be one in which the national states of Europe (and later the world) would be dismantled in favor of a single universal government that would usher in an era of "perpetual peace." In repeating this theory, Kant offered yet another version of the German-led Holy Roman Empire.

Adenauer's mid-20th-century proposals to restrain Germany by eliminating the Westphalian system of national states did not, for this reason, envision Germans giving up very much. The chancellor was in fact only reiterating a venerable German tradition as to what political arrangements in Europe should look like. By contrast, nations that had won their independence from the German emperors at such cost three or four centuries earlier were being asked to make quite a considerable sacrifice for the sake of the promised peace and prosperity.

In supporting the idea of unification on the European continent, both the British and the Americans, for their part, thought that their own national independence would not be affected. But they miscalculated. The Kantian argument for the moral superiority of international government cannot coexist in a single political order with the principle of national independence. Once that argument was unleashed again in postwar Europe, it quickly demolished the commitment to the Protestant construction previously held by much of the educated elite in Britain and even America. And this collapse only made sense. After all, why should anyone want to stand up for the idea of national independence, if national independence is what had brought the Holocaust and the horrors of two world wars?

The result is the political landscape we see around us. Advocate the virtues of the national state today, and you are not recognized as strengthening the foundations of the political order on which the West's freedoms were built. Instead, you are seeking to revive national and religious particularism, which is now considered akin to racism or fascism—the bad old world that was supposed to have died in 1945.

VI. Enforcing a Single Standard of Right

Liberals do not seem to understand that the advancing liberal construction is a form of imperialism. But to anyone not already immersed in the new order, the resemblance is obvious. Much like the Pharaohs and the Babylonian kings, the Roman emperors and the Roman Catholic Church until well into the modern period, as well as the Marxists of the last century, liberals, too, have their grand theory about how they are going to bring peace and economic prosperity to the

world by pulling down all the borders and uniting mankind under their own universal rule. Infatuated with the clarity and intellectual rigor of this vision, they disdain the laborious process of consulting with the multitude of nations they believe should embrace their view of what is right. And like other imperialists, they are quick to express disgust, contempt, and anger when their vision of peace and prosperity meets with opposition from those who they are sure would benefit immensely by simply submitting.

Let's focus for a moment on this last point. The West is now constantly being buffeted by waves of vilification in the media and in the corridors of power and on university campuses—"shaming" campaigns whose purpose is to stigmatize and render illegitimate one or another person or policy or group of people that is perceived as still having the ability to mount any kind of meaningful resistance to the imposition of liberal doctrine: Christians, the British, Trump supporters, the state of Israel, to name a few of the most prominent targets.

Much of what has been written about these campaigns has concentrated on the campus scene, where standards of "political correctness" have stifled the kind of academic freedom that once permitted a broader range of opinions to be expressed than is possible today. But universities are hardly the principal locus of rage against views now deemed inappropriate—including views about homosexuality, immigration, Islam, and a host of other subjects—and against those who hold such views. Much of the public sphere is now regularly visited by the same kinds of denunciatory and repressive campaigns that until recently seemed the special province of the universities. As the scope of legitimate disagreement is progressively reduced, and the penalties of dissent grow more and more onerous, the Western democracies are rapidly becoming one big university campus.

These increasingly insistent demands for conformity to a single universal standard in speech and religion are the predictable outcome of the transition away from the Protestant construction of the West, with its fundamental principle of national independence and self-determination mandating a measure of diversity and toleration for profoundly divergent views. Under the old order, after all, Catholics had to tolerate the existence of Protestant regimes, monarchists had to tolerate republican regimes, and tightly regulated governments had to tolerate more open regimes. Not every individual found it comfortable to live in every country. But there did exist the possibility of negotiating special provisions to allow dissenting communities to be left alone so long as they were not interested in publicly rocking the boat; and if you did want to rock the boat, there was the option of relocating to a neighboring state where your views would be tolerated or even embraced.

Under a universal order, by contrast, in which a single standard of right is held to be in force everywhere, the measure of toleration for diverse political and religious standpoints will necessarily decline. Western elites, whose views are

now being aggressively homogenized in keeping with the new liberal construction, find it increasingly difficult to see any need for the kind of toleration that the principle of national self-determination once permitted. Tolerance, like nationalism, is no longer associated with a progressive politics and a good will.

The vituperation heaped upon the English public and its elected leadership in the wake of the Brexit vote is an unmistakable warning to the West as a whole. From the point of view of the liberal construction, the unification of Europe is not one legitimate political option among others. It is the only legitimate option. The moral *illegitimacy* of Britain's vote for independence was thus the unrelenting theme of political and media figures decrying the vote: it was alleged that only the aged supported Brexit, thereby disenfranchising the young; or that only the uneducated had supported it; or that voters had meant only to cast a protest vote and not actually to leave Europe; and so forth. These pronouncements, by turns angry and patronizing, were then followed by the demand that the British public's preference be repealed—by a second referendum, or by act of Parliament, or by closed-door bargaining with the EU. Anything, so along as the one legitimate opinion should prevail.

The alarm and trepidation with which European and American elites responded to the prospect of an independent Britain revealed something that had long been obscured from view. That simple truth is that the emerging liberal construction is utterly incapable of respecting, much less celebrating, the deviation of nations seeking to assert a right to their own unique laws, traditions, and policies. Any such dissent is held to be vulgar and ignorant, if not evidence of a fascistic mindset.

Nor is Britain the only Western nation to have felt the sting of the whip. Needless to say, similar outbursts have repeatedly targeted Israel: for bombing Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981, for constructing housing complexes in eastern Jerusalem, for imposing a naval blockade on Gaza, and so on. America, too, is hardly immune. Its refusal to permit the International Criminal Court to try its soldiers, its unwillingness to sign the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse-gas emissions, its war in Iraq—all were met with similar outrage both at home and abroad. In one especially striking incident, when in 2010 the Arizona state legislature permitted the state's law officers to clamp down on illegal immigration, the Obama administration inserted a legal challenge to this action in a report filed with the United Nations Human Rights Council. Far from defending the freedom of Americans against foreign encroachment, the U.S. government saw fit to join forces with an international effort to tar Arizona with the stigma of moral illegitimacy.

Similar campaigns of delegitimization, in both Europe and America, have been directed against the practice of Christianity and Judaism, religions on which the old biblical political order is based, and whose free exercise has usually been protected or at least tolerated by Western national governments. We have

already seen attempts, especially in Europe, to ban such Jewish practices as circumcision and kosher slaughter in the name of liberal doctrines of universal rights. More recently, these doctrines have been used to force liberal teachings on sexuality and the family upon Christians and Jews in the workplace and in schools. It requires no special insight to see that, as more than one recent essay in *Mosaic* has [emphasized](#), this assault on religious liberty is only the beginning, and that the teaching and practice of traditional forms of Judaism and Christianity will become ever more untenable as the liberal construction advances.

In all of these cases, the first goal is to intimidate. And in many instances, this aim is being achieved. Nations, religions, organizations, and individuals throughout the West now know they have to think a second and third time before speaking or acting as though the Protestant political order were still in place. Genuine diversity in the constitutional or religious character of Western nations persists only at mounting cost to those who insist on their freedom.

VII. Suddenly, an Open Question

In the generation since Margaret Thatcher's ouster as prime minister of Britain in 1990, it has often seemed as though the consolidation of a new liberal order was a foregone conclusion. But the Brexit vote has opened a window of doubt. The Protestant construction, left to die by British elites in both the Labor and Conservative parties, has proved it still has some life in it. We do not yet know whether the attempt to pry the UK out of Europe will succeed. But the march toward a liberal construction has for the moment been halted, and the direction of the West has suddenly become an open question. The very existence of this question could revive forces that were thought to have dissipated from the world, taking us into a period of intensifying conflict between two irreconcilable visions of what the order of Western nations can and should be.

Voters in countries with strong national traditions, such as the Netherlands, France, Denmark, and Czechia, may have a major effect on what happens next. So will the upcoming U.S. election. The painful debate over Donald Trump's personal qualities and qualifications for the presidency has made it difficult to sustain a thoughtful discussion about the issues—primarily, the issue of American national self-determination—that catapulted him to the center of political attention. But no matter what happens in November, the political fault line that has been uncovered at the heart of Western politics is not going away. The politics of democratic nations are rearranging themselves along this fault line, dividing the motley defenders of the old Protestant construction from the cohesive and highly professionalized world of those hoping to bring it down. New candidates for office—perhaps more appealing than Trump, perhaps considerably less so—will take up one or another version of the same cause with consequences that cannot yet be predicted.

Although the gathering opposition to the liberal construction is a certainty, the nature of this opposition is still unclear. Since the Protestant construction was built upon two principles, one can, in theory, be opposed to liberalism from a standpoint that insists on only one of them.

Thus, on the one hand, there exists today what might be called a "neo-Catholic" opposition to the liberal construction (I don't mean that this view is embraced by all Catholics, or only by Catholics). Its spokesmen are known for deploring actions like the court-ordered demolition of a Ten Commandments monument on the grounds of the Oklahoma state capitol in 2015 or, in the same year, the U.S. Supreme Court's imposition of a new nationwide definition of marriage, seeing these as indications of the collapse of biblically derived standards for the conduct of legitimate government; yet these same spokesmen tend to show little appreciation of the grave threat to freedom presented by the abandonment of the national state.

On the other hand, there exists what is in effect a "neo-nationalist" view, which deplores the loss of national self-determination discernible in the project of European integration or in American "multilateralism," yet recognizes no particular danger in the dissolution of the biblical moral minimum that was once recognized as restraining the excesses of individuals and of the state alike.

Neither of these positions strikes me as offering a plausible alternative to liberalism. Neo-Catholicism will continue to fight rearguard culture wars against liberal elites on issues such as abortion or the definition of marriage, all the while lending active or passive support to the liberal internationalism that is systematically uprooting the right of nations to dissent on religious or cultural issues of this kind. Neo-nationalism may be effective in breaking certain countries out of the liberal order, but it could also produce authoritarian regimes of dubious worth to the nations they govern, thereby reinforcing the claim (promoted from their respective viewpoints by liberals and fascists alike) that the only alternative to liberalism is fascism.

The third alternative is conservatism (or "classical nationalism"), a political movement that has, at least since the early 17th century, sought to establish and defend an international order of national states based on the two principles of national self-determination and the biblical moral minimum for legitimate government. Conservatives recognize both principles of the Protestant construction as indispensable to preserving an international order that has been the freest, and in many respects the most successful, that has ever existed on earth.

In light of the kinds of historical shortcomings that I touched on earlier, any conservative effort to renew the Protestant construction would have to involve updating and revision in keeping with the needs of our times. That having been said, conservatives recognize the two principles of this order as the most realistic

framework that has yet been proposed for seeing our way toward a just and peaceable world.

Because European and American elites (including many university-educated Republicans in the U.S. and Tories in the UK) are today overwhelmingly liberal in their training and orientation, it is easy to find many well thought-out versions of liberal doctrines on the level of both theory and policy. By contrast, opposition to the liberal construction has an unprofessional and palpably makeshift quality about it. Conservative, neo-Catholic, and neo-nationalist views tend to be offered by scattered political candidates and intellectuals who share, on an intuitive level, a strong sense that the collapse of the Protestant order will be catastrophic in its consequences. But so far these intuitions have generally failed to give birth to the kind of political theory and historical work that could yield a coherent alternative to the order they are up against.

This means that for conservative intellectuals and politicians, the most pressing task right now is to articulate a restorative vision for re-establishing the political order—one that will be in accordance with the foundational principles of legitimate government and national self-determination drawn from the Protestant political tradition and Hebrew Scripture, while at the same time making provision for a new era. To have a chance of succeeding, this effort will require a meeting of minds among Old-Testament-conscious Protestants, nationalist Catholics, and Jews, in whose collective hands resides the question of how the Western nations can reconnect with the sources of their original, astonishing strength.

On the surface, Britain and America sometimes give the impression of being countries that have utterly freed themselves from their biblical heritage. But these are still nations that were formed by the Bible, and by the biblical message of freedom from empire. The events of the past year have shown just how powerful the Protestant construction remains in both countries, even after decades of ceding ground to the new liberal order that would replace it. The particular events themselves, and the personalities associated with them, may not be to everyone's liking, but they offer a chance to rethink, from a more critical point of vantage than has been possible until now, the commitment to a universally binding liberalism that has been embraced by elites in Europe and America. They have also given us a chance to ask ourselves whether the biblical freedom bequeathed to us by our forefathers might not still be the better choice.

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