

Article

The Cunning of Reason: The Post-Christian West and the State

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Abstract

The paper contends that post-Christianity in the West is a condition whose genealogy can be traced to fifteenth-century humanism and the subsequent events of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The essence of this condition lies in the emergence of the state, an outcome from centuries of debate concerning the domain of the spiritual versus secular authority over man and his world. This discourse ultimately undermined the authority of the ecclesiastical order and, consequently, Christianity in the West. And as the Christian foundation of the West gradually eroded, it was replaced by the secular, i.e., the state. This withering of Christianity has allowed the political, the emblematic feature of the state, to occupy the place previously held by the divine. The triumph of the secular realm has brought to saliency the centrality of the secular religion, i.e., the state, which strives to achieve broad, and often contradictory, social justice and equality goals, all in pursuit of its perceived noble aim of attaining happiness in this life.

Keywords: post-Christianity; reason; reformation; humanism; religion; state; sovereign

1. Introduction

Profound philosophical and cultural deliberation occur when societies experience momentous changes (Elton 1962, p. 459) that challenge and put on trial their core beliefs and values. In short, during a moral crisis. Different explanations or theories attempting to grasp and articulate the causes of these events are thus the result of minds that are attuned and alert to such crises (Sabine 1939). Out of such crises emerged, in Greece, Thucydides and the Socratic philosophers at the nadir of the Greek culture and civilization. In China, the turmoil of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods led to the emergence of philosophies from Confucius and Lao-tzu to Sunzi, Mozi and Han Feizi, along with many other thinkers and schools that flourished—collectively referred to as the Hundred Schools of Thought. In India, the uncertainty of the era gave rise to Buddhism, and the Upanishads were composed. What is even more noteworthy is that all these developments occurred simultaneously and independently of one another “without any one of these regions knowing of the others” (Jasper 1953). It was a decisive period in human history, between 800 BC–200 BC, that Jasper (1953) termed the Axial Period.

One can perhaps infer that the contemporary West is currently experiencing a moral or foundational crisis, where its post-Christian condition has put on trial its principal values and central beliefs. The question is whether such a foundational crisis warrants, especially from the West, profound deliberation and greater responsibility in addressing this existential predicament, akin to what occurred during the Axial Period, by questioning its unexamined assumptions and certainties. Though it is easy to raise such fundamental questions, it is undoubtedly a herculean task to suggest solutions to a crisis that threatens



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to collapse the whole edifice of an entire civilization. Indeed, it is not the task of this inquiry to carry out such a colossal undertaking. Rather the modest aim here is exclusively limited to tracing the genealogy of the current crisis, i.e., the post-Christian condition in the West.

The Judeo-Christian foundation of Western civilization has been gradually eroding as more people in the West move away from Christianity (Davis 2025; Inglehart 2021). Most recent surveys, at the time of this writing, such as those conducted by Gallup, Pew Research Survey, and the World Values Survey, suggest a decline in religious affiliation in the West (Vigers and Ray 2025; Smith et al. 2025; Inglehart 2021). The nature of this decline is reflected in a steady and gradual waning across all indices of measurement: people's identification with Christianity, their belief in and the importance of God in the daily affairs of life, and the frequency of prayer and church service attendance (Inglehart 2021; Vigers and Ray 2025; Smith et al. 2025). Indeed, it is a presentiment of what this study investigates. Such a decline in faith in the broader Western world is concerning precisely because the trajectory toward which the West, as a culture and civilization, is heading is uncertain (Davis 2025). Is the West heading toward an 'end of history' moment? Or is the post-Christian condition a temporary stop anticipating a new 'secular' and 'freer' world that is yet to be born (see Inglehart 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2011)? The task at hand is not to engage in answering such profound questions, although they are important. Rather, our task here is to trace the underpinning root or *geist* that led to the present post-Christian condition of the West. For we can safely assume that the decline in faith, in our context Christianity, simply cannot occur in a vacuum; after all, we are dealing with man and the entirety of his culture. One can thus infer that there must be some events or discourses, be they mundane or profound, that shape the evolving trajectory of a culture and civilization, leading to the present condition.

The paper, therefore, sets out to reason that the post-Christian West is a condition whose genealogy can be traced to fifteenth-century humanism, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment movement. The essence of this condition is the rise of the state. This essence is the outcome of centuries of discourse over the jurisdiction and authority concerning the divine and secular realms. This discourse took a significant turn, marked by the watershed events of the fifteenth-century humanist movement, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment periods. These periods provide the historical context needed to trace and recognize the forces that have led to the current post-Christian condition of the West. Indeed, the basis for choosing these movements is that it was in these periods that the most intense discourse concerning the dominion of the spiritual and secular authority over man and his world occurred, which ultimately shaped the present condition by undermining the authority of the ecclesiastical order, and thus of Christianity. In short, the implication of this proposition is that as the role of the state grows, which it clearly has because the entire societal structure is built around this notion, Christianity is likely to keep declining in the West. For the state has supplanted Christianity and, indeed, religion. We can extrapolate this implication further by asserting that this outcome is not exclusive to Christianity, with perhaps Islam and Judaism being exceptions (though this is contingent on how secular Islamic and Jewish nations become).

Before commencing our inquiry, a brief outline of some key assumptions vital to this inquiry, along with a brief caveat to address some potential objections that may arise concerning this study, is needed. Beginning with the assumptions, there are certain assumptions which this investigation holds as axiomatic, given the task of tracing the genealogy of the current crisis. The first is that the genealogy of this crisis can be traced to the Italian humanist movement, deemed to be its starting point. Second, that the post-Christian condition represents a moral crisis, and therefore, a crisis affecting civilization and its foundations. It is assumed that post-Christian condition is not a religious crisis or a crisis

within Christianity, as these are mere symptoms of a more extensive and deeper crisis of the soul, namely, a moral crisis. Third, because this condition is a moral crisis, it represents an existential crisis of the highest degree. It is not a momentary gale. If one can glean any lessons from studying the histories of major civilizations or empires, it is that they eroded from within, and these erosions manifested themselves through various symptoms—the Socratic periods in Greece; the transition from republic to empire in Rome; the Spring and Autumn periods in China; the decadence and conflicts preceding the collapse of the Abbasid and Umayyad caliphates into the hands of, as Ibn Khaldun put it, the Bedouins; the pervasive corruption and the Brahmanical reaction that fueled internal instability before the collapse of the Mauryan empire; and possibly the cultural and manufactured conflicts in the contemporary West—from which no civilizations or empires have recuperated.

Fourth, as it identifies a moral and existential crisis, the study assumes the unity of knowledge that modern academic disciplines categorize as the socio-economic, cultural, religious, political, historical, or philosophical domains. The Weberian approach of compartmentalization and specialization, though expedient, truncates our understanding and inhibits us from attaining a fuller comprehension of the deep moral existential crisis. Given that the West is rooted in Judeo-Christian foundations, which is also the object of this study, it is therefore prudent for our understanding to trace the genealogy of this crisis in an extensive manner. There is nothing new about this method. Just for illustrative purpose, consider the work of Thucydides' *History of Peloponnesian War*. This work is not limited to historical content. It would be imprudent to reduce one of the major achievements of Western civilization to a writing of history. If that were true, the work would not have survived this long. The work is a piercing examination of the very essence of the Athenian soul: the divisive partisan politics of that age and time, the corrupting ethics that pervaded Athenian society, the formalities of rituals, the rationalization of expediency, the failing of courage and prudence, and the mind that is unable to resist the seduction of demagoguery. All were symptoms of the underlying moral crisis affecting not only Athens but the entire Greek civilization. Likewise, the same can be said about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Ibn Khaldun, Confucius, Cicero, Kautilya, the Upanishads, the Jataka tales, and numerous others.

Lastly, which also serves as a caveat, because the aim of this study is to trace the roots of the post-Christian West, it assumes that there is a shared thread connecting various thinkers, even if the periods and movements under consideration are quite distinct. For the purpose of this study, our focus is not primarily on distinguishing the particularities of treatises by different figures from equally distinct movements, although these are significant in their own right. Instead, our focus is on identifying that single root that is shared by all irrespective of how disparate their thoughts may be across time, space, or diversity of camps. Take for instance, for the purpose of illustration, Machiavelli. Here he is essential to our purpose in revealing the underlying thread shared by all the other thinkers from the periods being examined. Likewise, the same applies to the other figures and movements. We are not drawing major distinctions between the diverse figures who outwardly have different views; nor are we highlighting the substantial difference between equally disparate movements that are far from being uniform. Beneath the apparent differences and ostensible contradictions, they all intimately share the same root, the same genealogy, the same thread. In other words, irrespective of the differences between the three periods and the diversity within them, the fundamental role of 'reason' remains consistent across all. Failing to recognize the significance of this particular assumption, the study could appear overly reductive and might even give the impression of an inability to grasp the subtle intricacies of these movements and figures.

By virtue of tracing the underlying forces shaping the present outcome, our task here naturally precludes trotting out prominent treatises by exclusively focusing on figures

of these periods of interests. The reason is not that they are inconsequential but that the inquiry requires to lay bare that which is shaping the discourse concerning the jurisdiction of the two kingdoms. This inquiry is also neither about the treatises of the prominent figures, nor an example of pettifogging about the minute distinctions within and between the three periods under examination, for that would be misleading. Instead, it is about the questions deliberated and the tool, i.e., reason, employed to secure the respective positions of the protagonists involved. Furthermore, the movements of interest were not uniform in any sense. Each of these movements was highly diverse and varied in terms of the individuals it comprised and the views they advocated. Yet, despite this varied nature, these periods were uniform in their responses to the question concerning salvation and which realm had jurisdiction over man and his world.

Related to these assumptions and the caveat is the method used in this investigation. The study is exploratory in nature. It is a distinct and specialized scientific methodological approach “designed to maximize discovery of generalizations based on description and direct understanding” of a phenomenon through broad-ranging, systematic data collection (Stebbins 2008, p. 327). This methodology is particularly appropriate for exploring areas with limited existing knowledge or, more importantly, emerging issues that have not being extensively studied (Swedberg 2020). Its flexible methodological approach allows the investigator to deduce conjectures from the emergent theoretical framework of the study, facilitating the discovery of new ideas and observations (Swedberg 2020; Stebbins 2008).

What is significant in this investigation is not so much the disagreements concerning the domain of authority between ecclesiastical and secular power. Rather, it is the nature of the questions debated that actuated the rise of the secular state. The triumph of the secular state is plausible only with the undermining of the spiritual authority in directing life at the earthly realm. This is not to suggest that there were intentional actions on the part of the protagonists on both sides of the discourse to elevate the supremacy of the secular authority, as we will see that such was seldom the case. Discourse surrounding questions like the church’s role in organizing secular life, the domain between the church and secular authority, discussions about the involvement of Christians in secular matters, concerns regarding certainty and control in personal life, and similar topics consistently required the use of reason by protagonists to either support their own position or challenge opposing ones. What we see is that deliberating about these questions steadily eroded the authority of the Christian church. We observe time and again how protagonists on both sides, such as Alberti, Bruni, Luther, Melancthon, Ignatius, and Suárez and Hobbes among others, made great efforts to illustrate the verity of their respective claims, while simultaneously attempting to demonstrate the falseness of their opponents’ positions by asserting that these views are incompatible with reason or philosophy.

This is clearly evident in what was to become a recurrent feature that continued in the coming periods: for instance, how Origen, Justin Martyr, and Athenagoras used reason to support and serve the faith, as well as establish a common basis where both believers and non-believers can agree. This was also essential to Augustine, as he saw philosophy as a necessary tool to grasp the principles of faith through the use of reason. It was through philosophy, he believed, that Christians can make their position intelligible to those who did not subscribe to the Christian faith (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). In light of the ongoing intersection between the spiritual and temporal spheres, demonstrating how faith aligns with reason became the very seed of Christianity’s decline. It is akin to the Marxist dictum of how capitalism contains the seed of its own destruction. To make room for reason or philosophy within the walls of Christendom was to spell its own demise. This is not to suggest that reason should have no place in Christianity; rather, by virtue of justifying its

position in accordance with reason, the apologists of Christianity, unintentionally, extricated the original sense of awe through the cold, mechanical hands of reason.

Though well intentioned, attempting to justify divine providence through the use of reason, something which Augustine and Luther viewed as inherently defective because of man's fallen nature (Luther 2024; Augustine 1998), ineluctably emasculated the faith and diminished the sense of the divine. There is nothing intentional or pre-planned about this secular turn, later to be embodied in the state. Rather, the very act of contemplation brought to the fore the very condition the West is faced with today. This is perhaps the consequence of, as Hegel would assert, the cunning of reason. Indeed, the apologists of the church were not solely responsible for the onset of this secular machine. Other key protagonists in the discourse (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Voltaire, D'Alambert, Diderot, and several other significant but less well-known figures) equally contributed. Their aim was not to establish a post-Christian society, but rather to substantiate the dominance of human reason by testing the claims of the divine authority and revealing its shortcomings. This kind of discourse actuated a process in which people's faith in God's involvement in the daily affairs of life gradually diminished and naturally disappeared (Sheehan and Wahrman 2015), thus actuating the unavoidably post-Christian condition of the Western world.

2. Reason: The *Zeitgeist* of the Ages

To understand how this process led to the present, it is perhaps crucial to commence by examining that particular *zeitgeist*, reason, which formed the basis of the discourse concerning the authority of the divine and the temporal world, i.e., if temporal authority should supersede ecclesiastical authority. Discourse concerning such questions inescapably involved the use of reason. The utterance of any comprehensible statement concerning such questions entails the involvement of protagonists to demonstrate that their positions, whatever their positions may be, are agreeable with reason. After all, how can one justify spiritual or the temporal authority, irrespective of how apologetic one is, based purely on a belief that can be neither proven nor disproven? This was especially onerous for the Christian apologists since they had the additional burden of demonstrating not only how faith or revelation, the divine providence, aligns with reason, but also that the latter complements the former. Aquinas, for instance, seldom differentiated between revelation and reason (*On Kingship*, Aquinas 1949). For him, God in his infinite wisdom made certain natural truths accessible only through human reason. As he insists, "To be sure, the light of reason is placed by nature in every man, to guide him in his acts towards his end. Wherefore, if man were intended to live alone, as many animals do, he would require no other guide to his end. Each man would be a king unto himself, under God, the highest King, inasmuch as he would direct himself in his acts by the light of reason given him from on high" (*On Kingship*, Aquinas 1949, I, 1, §4). He even goes so far as to uphold reason as the criterion for evaluating theological assertions (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). Luther, on the contrary, believed that such Thomist ideas present a picture as if reason stands above and beyond the fallen human condition, and are therefore unable to recognize the flawed nature of reason (Luther 2024).

It is essential to appreciate the role of reason as a tool, perhaps not intentionally, in shaping the nature of this discourse. Though for most Christian apologists of these periods Scripture was regarded as the sole criterion for determining what constituted an appropriate guide for daily affairs, it nevertheless required seeking guidance from reason. This inadvertently affected how the discourse would eventually reduce the significance and dominance of Christianity to the private domain. And in doing so, it rendered Christianity, as the basis for life and meaning, untenable. It declared religion superfluous. This same *zeitgeist*, reason, which gained prominence during the enlightenment, declared that the

enlightened mind should aspire to the true ‘science’ of man. Such aspiration stems from the assumption that Christianity is inconsequential, a belief that has by now confined Christianity to the private domain. It is as though, as Luther claims, “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God” (Strauss and Cropsey 1987, p. 321). Perhaps, it is reason that allows man to aspire to be God, because a tool is required to dispel the power of the abstract, incorporeal entity that governs his fate and destiny. One must be alert here: we are not claiming that reason is imprudent. We are not making a value judgement. Rather, reason serves as the indispensable tool in dismantling the edifice of divine providence. Indeed, even its apologists would have seldom envisioned the condition in which Christianity is now confined in the West.

What gave reason its potency within this discourse were the unavoidable, yet uncomfortable, questions regarding how Christians should conduct their daily affairs in the temporal world. Since the issue of faith is undeniably tied to man’s eternal future, the question concerning, as Schmitt (2007) phrased it, how the political within the temporal world becomes an integral element of any theological reflection. This necessarily covers fundamental questions regarding the boundaries, the nature, and the function of political community and civil authority (Mortimer 2021). In other words, the proper sphere and place of temporal authority in relation to divine providence. Therefore, from a biblical standpoint, any reflection concerning faith naturally raises questions about the relationship between church and state, the limits of political authority, the association between sin and secular power, relationship between revelation and human reason, reciprocal duties of the rulers and the ruled, the role of secular governance in relation to the doctrine of salvation, and how Christians ought to engage with temporal government (Baylor 2013; Strauss and Cropsey 1987; Luther 2024). It becomes evidently clear from what has been just mentioned that it is significantly difficult to delineate the frontiers between the secular and the spiritual spheres without saying a great deal about both. In fact, to speak of salvation is to speak in general about the manner in which one is called upon to live, in Augustine’s words, in the city. For it is only through the merits of one’s conduct in this life that a person may be bestowed with the blessed salvation for the life hereafter.

For our purpose, what matters here is the tool, i.e., human reason, deemed appropriate for addressing these questions. It is crucial that we do not lose sight of this human reason as we move forward, as it is vital for understanding the present condition that led to novel conceptual forces such as the sovereign state and the heightened emphasis on liberty to become the basis of the structuring and arranging of secular life. These forces will in the long run undermine the very foundations of Christianity. Crucial to our task at hand is to grasp the underlying thread that is common, irrespective of the apparent varied nature of the questions, that of man’s relation to God.

The preceding passages have established that any examination of temporal life inevitably raises questions about man’s relationship with God; after all, it is the merits of men’s conduct in the secular world that determines whether he will attain eternal bliss or suffer eternal condemnation. Given how fundamental this concern was, it naturally involved the use of a tool to make one’s position intelligible to non-believers. At the same time, it also serves as a defense against inimical objections raised against it. That is to say, if reason is accessible to all by virtue of being human, then the dispensation of what counts as appropriate responses to the questions about the doctrine of eternal salvation, or whether divine providence should supersede the secular authority, or whether Christians should obey or reject the secular temporal authority, and so on, must align with the logic of human reasoning. Failing to do so only reveals the indefensibility of one’s position, be it defending the supremacy of the spiritual over the secular, vice versa, or a mix of both.

We see this, for instance, in how Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, among many others, maintained their positions by enunciating how the spiritual was in agreement with the logic of reason, irrespective of its fallen nature. Augustine, arguably the first writer in light of the newly revealed religion to address the question of civil-secular authority in a comprehensive manner, depended on human reason to demonstrate the reasonableness of the spiritual realm's superiority over the secular, for he saw reason as an aid to faith. He, therefore, did not find it problematic to employ reason in establishing the supremacy of the true Christian virtue embodied in the idea of justice. All this was, in turn, contingent on the doctrine of divine grace that enabled justice to be administered in civil society (Augustine 1998). Indeed, the pains he took to show the primacy of the spiritual over the secular are evident in his *City of God* (Augustine 1998). Similarly, Aquinas, in his efforts to harmonize revelation and reason, instructs one to perceive the naturalness of civil society and thus political authority. It becomes an essential aspect for man to realize the fullest potential of his rational nature. After all, for Aquinas, God has structured the world so that certain truths can only be perceived and are accessible only through human reason (Aquinas 1949, 1998).

For the Christian apologists, the focus was on the use of reason to uphold their position. They utilized the nonbelievers' own tool of reason to counter objections that are inimical to their position (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). Take for instance the early apologist, Justin Martyr, who formulated the logos doctrine presenting Christianity to be a true philosophy, with Christ as the manifestation of the divine logos. He used reason to defend faith (*Dialogue with Trypho*, Martyr 2003; Roberts and Donaldson 1903). Or consider Athenagoras, an early apologist, who advocated for the rational foundations of the Christian faith to defend against the pagan critique (Roberts and Donaldson 1885a). Likewise, other early apologists like Tertullian, though wary of reason, still employed it as a tool to defend Christian faith (*The Apology of Tertullian*, Tertullian 1890; Roberts and Donaldson 1885b); and Origen Adamantius, who was deeply shaped by Platonic philosophy, assigned reason an essential place in interpreting and clarifying Christian doctrine. He believed that faith and reason are in harmony (*Contra Celsum*, Origen 1953). These, along with others, recognized the value of reason as a helpful tool in apologetics. That is why we are here keen to observe not what was presented, for instance, by Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Origen, or Augustine, for that is hardly new knowledge we have discovered. Instead, it is about how reason was utilized to actuate their defense of the Christian order.

It is essential at this juncture to briefly highlight one aspect of Christianity that made it disposed to, perhaps more than the other two Abrahamic religions, reason's inimical dissection of the divine and thus the primacy of the secular. This has to do with the clear distinction between the spiritual and temporal spheres, which we do not find in Judaism and Islam. Judaism and Islam present themselves above all else as all-inclusive social orders that regulate every aspect of their followers' lives, both public and private. On the contrary, Christianity primarily sets itself as adherence to faith, where its followers observe certain fundamental beliefs concerning their spiritual lives and their lives hereafter. Other than this, it affords the followers liberty as to how to organize their social and political lives according to principles that are not necessarily religious (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). Consequently, this leads a Christian society to be governed by two distinct authorities, each with its own set of laws. One is ecclesiastical, directing man toward eternal salvation, and the other is secular, directing man toward a temporal end. With its own separate spheres of competence and authority, each sphere is relatively free from the interference of the other (Strauss and Cropsey 1987). This is interesting because Christians, for instance, are subject to two authorities, both demanding unswerving adherence from the same person, perhaps even at the same time. Paul's letters to the Romans ("Let every soul be subject to

the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God", Romans 13:1, NKJV) and the Gospel of Matthew ("Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" Matthew 22:21, NKJV) direct Christians to submit to temporal authorities. Certainly, these directions are based on the assumption that all earthly authority comes from God.

It may seem contradictory that, on the one hand, as discussed in the preceding passages, the frontier between the spiritual and the secular is indistinct, and that one cannot speak of the former without speaking a great deal about the latter. However, on the other hand, as was just mentioned, there are two distinct realms of authority, each with its own code of law, suggesting that the frontier between the two spheres is distinct and clear, which is incongruent with an indistinct frontier. How do we reconcile these diagonally opposite claims? For our purpose, the response is that it depends upon which camp of the discourse one is sided with: secular, ecclesiastical, or a blend of both. The rationale is that, considering our task at hand, what matters is not whether there exists a clear, distinct boundary between the secular and the spiritual. For us, it is the motivational tool, reason, that ultimately affords such questions of distinction and the dominance of the one over the other to arise in the first place. That is why, when viewed through the perspective of human reason, these contradictions must be resolved through reason itself. And to reconcile the apparent paradox, a definitive conclusion must be reached that asserts either the dominance of the secular over the spiritual or vice versa.

3. The Italian Humanist Movement

Beginning from the fifteenth-century Italian humanist movement, the discourse entered a transformative age. We begin to see the unleashing of new forces that organically and gradually eroded the standing of Christianity, at least in Europe, with overwhelming effect. The consequence was the relegation of the spiritual, even from the meagre private sphere, leading to the evaporation of the divine from people's imagination across the broader Western world. We will continue along the same line of thought to the preceding passages as we move further into our inquiry with regard to our periods of interests: fifteenth-century Italian humanism, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment period. For the purpose of this investigation, our focus is not primarily on the treatises that either defend or attack the opposing viewpoints. Rather, we are keen to isolate and highlight how the use of reason shaped the discourse by conjuring new concepts and realities that were to prove too powerful for the divine, with consequence that the West is no doubt still encountering.

As Europe, more specifically Italy, entered the fifteenth century, we begin to see a new development: the vital steps in tilting the scale in favor of the temporal world. This development, in what is to become one of the most crucial steps in signaling the gradual decline of the spiritual authority, was the recovery of classical values, especially those of the Roman classics. With the recovery of and access to, for the first time since the destruction of the Roman empire, the classical works of Cicero, Tacitus, Plutarch, Lucretius, and Quintilian in the fourteenth century, the humanist movement that subsequently emerged played an essential role in reviving a human aspect that early Christian writers like Augustine dismissed: man's ability to achieve perfection or reach the highest form of excellence. This movement, led by figures like Petrarch (1304–1374) and Boccaccio (1313–1375), was rooted in the teachings of classical history, poetry, philosophy, and, above all, rhetoric. The recovery of the classics in the previous century came to its fullest maturation in the following century. We see the impact of this in the numerous Italian republics of the fifteenth century, especially with their preoccupation on the Ciceronian concept of 'virtue' that was bequeathed with the highest distinction. The outcome was a complete transformation

concerning the very nature of man, which unvaryingly involved questions about man's proper ambition, his purpose, and the extent of his capabilities (Cassirer et al. 1948; King 2014; Baker 2015).

What is crucial in the current argument is to show the radical bearing virtue had not so much on expanding the horizon of the human mind, but in highlighting the dominance of human reason as the primary tool for critical inquiry. Taking cues from Cicero's works, people of standing in the society of this age contemplated upon virtue and its qualities, man's capacity to attain the highest excellence in light of this virtue, and above all, his ability to cultivate that single highest virtue that "outshines the rest", which enables the possessor of this single virtue to be "*vir virtutis* or man of true manliness", i.e., a man of wisdom (Skinner 1978a, p. 87; Baker 2015; also see, Alberti's (1969) *The Family*). For Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), in his *In Praise of the City of Florence* (1404), this 'man of wisdom', this 'truly manly man', is first and foremost a citizen: a man of the world, of public affairs, of the secular and temporal world. He puts his wisdom to use in the conduct of public affairs, thereby fulfilling himself as a citizen. It is his engagements in public affairs that enable his virtues to outshine those of others, thus earning him the highest praises, glories, and laurels (King 2014). Though a possessor of virtue, engaging in the secular affairs of the world also necessitates this *vir virtutis* to use rhetoric, that art of persuasion through eloquent communication that impels listeners to perform virtuous acts. Indeed, that was precisely what Bartolomeo della Fonte (1446–1513) meant when he personified the art of rhetoric as the "mistress of the whole human race" (Trinkaus 1960, p. 99). Thus, a man of virtue in his public affairs is able to unite wisdom and eloquence that "stamp and drive deep into the heart that sharpest and most ardent stings of speech" (Skinner 1978a, p. 88). If the political, an emblem of the temporal world, is about action, then this Renaissance man is the embodiment of the zenith of the secular sphere. Nowhere do we find any references to God in achieving the virtues of the highest order. For the humanists, religious belief is irrelevant for the virtuous life. That is why Bruni simply ignores revelation: for him, reason, not divine providence, is the foundation of morality and political excellence. For Giovanni Alberti (1404–1472), *virtú* or the creative power of reason renders the Christian notion of grace inconsequential (*The Family*, Alberti 1969), indeed reflecting Boccaccio's conviction about the power of reason and the potential to attain virtue independent of revelation (*Decameron*, Boccaccio 1920).

Connected to the distinction conferred to virtue is the idea of designing educational curricula to cultivate these esteemed qualities among the population (Baker 2015; Trinkaus 1970). Explicitly equated here is the notion of progress as opposed to its antonym, backwardness or ignorance. It assumes this kind of education essential for cultivating character that is at once laudable and appealing, primarily because a person, as Bartolommeo della Fonte notes, who can combine wisdom with eloquence has at his disposal the power to do good, punish the wicked, bring laurels to his land, and generously benefit all of mankind (Trinkaus 1960). Such adulation implies a presupposition about the role of reason in advancing the human mind and human condition that jettisons the very need for the spiritual sphere. After all, it is the *vir virtutis* who can easily dispense justice, punish the wicked, and be a blessing to his land. In Bartolommeo's schemes of things, it is man, whose aim is nothing less than "universal excellence" (Skinner 1978a, p. 91), who occupies the central place, and achieves this without ever needing to refer to or seek divine approval, as seen in Alberti (1969, *The Family*) and Bruni's work (King 2014). However, this is not an exception but the rule, a standard, with Machiavelli as the culminating figure.

All of this directs us to one of the most significant implications of this worldview: it actuated the humanists to reject the Augustinian view of human nature, thereby rejecting man in its entirety, with Bruni and Alberti works serving as notable examples. No longer is

there a need for divine grace, no longer is man seen to be fallen and consequently incapable of perfection, no longer is man's fate subjected to the capricious dictates of *Fortuna*. On the contrary, man is the maker, the author of his destiny; he is in control, he is capable of attaining the highest excellence, and thus capable of establishing a perfect social life,—a view strongly expressed by Alberti in his work *The Family*. Tersely put, Alberti's man is a 'sovereign' being endowed with liberty and power to decide for himself his own destiny. We will see in the coming passages the implication of the concept of the sovereign. This notion is a nice way to broach the issue of control (*fortuna*) or the lack of control over one's life that preoccupied the minds of many. The strident confidence in Alberti's man's ability, excellence and potential to attain perfection is a refined response to the aspect of life over which man had little or no control over fate, or what the humanists viewed as the capricious nature of *fortuna*.

It is essential to recognize the humanists' preoccupation with *fortuna* in the context of prevailing reservations against ecclesiastical authority at that time. The idea of luck, fortune, occupied a crucial place in the humanists' discourse in light of the recovery and full development of the classics. What the discovery of the classics did was not only to illustrate, by way of contrast, the splendor of Rome with their own condition as small republics, but also to juxtapose the zenith of the Roman Republic with the fate or the demise of the Republic and its eventual collapse as an empire and civilization. It is this that served as the emblematic illustration for humanists of the capricious nature of human fate and how seldom man has control over the dictates of his life. This lack of mastery or sovereignty over one's fate drove even the most sanguine humanists or pursuers of virtue to pessimism, a source of sorrow, and, for Machiavelli, a constant hindrance to attaining happiness in this life.

Yet, the prevailing *zeitgeist*, the confidence in human reason and its creative power, of that age emboldened man's vociferous confidence in himself to wrestle mastery and attain sovereignty over his life against the tyranny of fortune. The will to affirm to this life, to paraphrase Nietzsche's words, of the *vir virtutis* infused a renewed sense of enthusiasm to struggle against and subdue the whims of fortune, and to a certain degree, retain mastery over one's own fate. The will to struggle against and subdue the power of fortune arises from the humanists'—such as Petrarch, Alberti, and Pico della Mirandola—novel belief and emphasis on the concept of free will, i.e., liberty (Cassirer et al. 1948; Trinkaus 1970; King 2014; Witt 2018). An important subsequent development at that time was man's affirmation and capacity to control his destiny, especially visible in Bruni's works. In fact, it was this anti-Augustinian doctrine of the concept of liberty to not only shape man's character but also mold his world, that reflects the humanists' rejection of any providential authority over the affairs of the world (King 2014; Skinner 1978a). Hence, the humanists' assumption that jettisons the very question of spiritual and secular spheres.

To envisage the possibility of control over one's fate implies a credence in the existence of liberty that enables man to organically exercise his liberty by choosing to shape his character and master over his destiny, thus refuting the Christian doctrine of salvation, casting doubt on the very existence of divine providence and its related corollaries. Dante is clear about this:

The greatest gift the magnanimity
of God, as He created, gave, the gift
most suited to His goodness, gift that He
most prizes, was the freedom of the will;
those beings that have intellect—all these
and none but these—received and do receive

this gift: thus you may draw, as consequence,
 the high worth of a vow, when what is pledged
 with your consent encounters God's consent;
 for when a pact is drawn between a man
 and God, then through free will, a man gives up
 what I have called his treasure, his free will. (Alighieri 1980, *Paradiso*, Canto V,
 Lines 19–30, translation Allen Mandelbaum)

This Canto in the *Divine Comedy* beautifully captures and enunciates the invaluable gift of God to man, free will. The liberty to choose for himself. Dante emphasizes that the source of man's freedom and his choices lie in the "magnanimity of God", a puissant notion that influenced the thoughts of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Bruni, Alberti, and della Mirandola, making the Italian humanist movement a *tour de force* in affecting the course of Western civilization. What is most important to Dante is what one does with this freedom that is given. It is not about how one should castrate himself of the "greatest gift" in preparation for the life hereafter, as the church apologists would insist. It is about what can one do to achieve the greatest excellence and the noblest virtues with the greatest gift conferred by the Almighty. He is actuating the profound significance of liberty, so profound that he equates liberty with God. And how does one achieve unsurpassable excellence and divine virtues? For Dante, it is through unceasing questioning and challenging of orthodoxy and accepted beliefs. Indeed, it is divine to question. In questioning, man fulfills his divine mission. This spirit is fully embodied in the main characters, Dante and Beatrice, of the *Divine Comedy*, as they unswervingly engage in discussions concerning the nature of humanity, sin, love, and virtue. Their spirit of curiosity and willingness to freely question anticipate the scientific spirit of subsequent periods, including the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

It is this credence in liberty that allowed humanists to have confidence in man's ability to attain the highest level of excellence and achieve perfection, validated by the glory, honor, and admiration that result from possessing such unsurpassable virtues. This way, man in his liberty subdues and reduces the capricious fortune to nothing more than a chance, thereby negating the possibility of divine control in the daily affairs of life. This newfound sovereignty is a vindication of Protagoras' statement: "man is the measure of all things". That is to say, because man is naturally endowed with liberty, it is, as Burckhardt (1990) states, this 'individual' man's choices and responsibilities that direct his fate. Man, ultimately is the sole author of whatever good or ill that befalls him, not divine providence or *fortuna*.

However, man's credence in liberty presupposes his ability to reason, to use reason as an aid to arrive at the nature of things and events. After all, without the aid of reason, how can he even cognize his potential for excellence, which is contingent on his ability to accept that he is naturally endowed with reason. It is the one tool that enables him to assert his life, his liberty, and his ability to become "man of true manliness" by subduing fortune, abating the need for divine authority, and asserting mastery over the dictates of his daily life. With reason as his instrument, so much is this possessor of true virtue "...felt to possess God-like qualities that the humanists express this sense of what is due to a *vir virtutis* in precisely the same language later used in the Authorised Version of the Bible to describe what is due to God: "...honour, glory and praise" (Skinner 1978a, p. 99). Indeed, it is a direct assault on the basic assumptions of Christianity. This spirit, vividly encapsulated in the works of Bruni, Alberti, and Mirandola, finds its culmination in the writings of Machiavelli.

Machiavelli serves as the culminating figure of the humanist movement (Baker 2015; Skinner 1978a; Bayley 1961; Castiglione 1901). His works are the product of this prevailing *zeitgeist* of the fifteenth-century humanist period. All the major and novel concepts and

imaginings of this period—namely liberty, sovereignty, control (mastery), virtue, and the state—attained their saliency in his works, which were consequentially taken up to a striking extent in the subsequent periods that weakened the very foundations of Christianity in Europe. His works somberly foreshadowed the contemporary fate of Christianity in Europe, and with that a final definitive response to centuries-long discourse about the two realms: the spiritual and the temporal. Many of the presuppositions and central arguments in his works, particularly *The Prince*, reaffirm in the most mature and noticeable manner the acme of the temporal realm, where the spiritual realm serves as a means to attain and satisfy secular desires.

When Machiavelli insists on the significance of power, fear, usury, force, counterfeiting virtue and religiosity, and the need to be a man of flexible disposition, among many other aspects of “virtue” (Machiavelli 2009), he is unswervingly affirming the supremacy of the temporal world. He is asserting the liberty of man to attain mastery over this secular world, whose principles and demands are diametrically opposed to those of Christianity. If the spiritual world once served as the organizing principle of life and society, the ultimate goal of achieving eternal salvation in the life hereafter, then Machiavelli anticipates (as developed further by Hobbes) the supplantation of the spiritual world by the secular-temporal world (i.e., the state) with its own principle (i.e., liberty), virtues (i.e., enabling control/mastery over one’s fate), and God (i.e., sovereignty). Indeed, the foundation of the state is one of the centrally recurring themes in Machiavelli’s work (Hornqvist 2013). In other words, replacing the Christian God and its ecclesiastical authority with a secular god and its civil authority. Here, too, it is reason, man’s innate gift, that allows him to recognize the precedence of the secular realm over the abstract spiritual realm. The doctrine of salvation, by contrast, appears overly removed and far too abstract to have influence over people’s lives. In an attempt to shape his destiny and his world, man employs reason to organize his concrete world, i.e., the state, where he is both the sovereign and a member. More importantly, he is the author of the rules because he is free, i.e., possesses liberty. These themes continued to be developed during the Reformation and were later brought to their prominence through the “legitimizing discourse” (Skinner 2006, p. 243) of the Enlightenment period.

4. The Reformation

As Europe entered the Reformation, the discourse over whether the secular or the spiritual realm held greater importance took an unplanned turn, an unintended outcome of Christian apologists, which more or less sealed the fate of divine authority. Paradoxically, some of the prominent concepts from the previous centuries, such as state, sovereignty, and liberty, attain their saliency during this period. Here too, similar to the previous sections, our focus will be on the underlying tool that shaped the course and the eventual outcome of the discourse. From this perspective, although Christian in character, the Reformation was nevertheless secular in its essence. In defending the supremacy of ecclesiastical authority (be they from the Protestant or the Catholic perspective) through the use of reason, reformers unwittingly established and set the stage for the triumph of the secular. The conflict between the reformers and the Catholic Church, though an important aspect of the Reformation, is not our focus here, as both sides inevitably employed reason to support their positions. Furthermore, this is not what we are seeking, since the specific nature of this debate does not provide much insight into our current task. Rather, we are dissecting the surface to uncover what is truly driving the discourse from within, i.e., reason.

One inconvenient question that continued to linger from the previous centuries and trouble both factions of Christianity during this period involved the subject concerning the jurisdiction of the church and the civil magistrate, i.e., the state. For the Protestant

reformers, this meant a complete break from the traditional Roman Church's belief that God established two authorities, one to oversee spiritual life and the other to govern the secular world (Baylor 2013; Lunn-Rockliffe 2013). This assumed that earthly authority exists for the sake of temporal and secular ends rather than spiritual ends (Mortimer 2021). The Protestants rejected this notion in favor of the view, embodied in the words of Protestant pastor Philip Melanchthon, "For God established political societies so that the Gospel might be advanced" (cited in Mortimer 2021, p. 63). It is by God's approval, insists Melanchthon in his *Loci Communes*, that the civil magistrate yields the sword to administer justice and punish the wicked, in a sense doing the Lord's bidding here on earth (Melanchthon 2014). What we see here is the affirmation of the priority of the spiritual over the temporal. However, it cannot simply be accepted as it is. Instead, such affirmations must be agreeable to reason. Otherwise, it runs the risk of substantiating the verity of those highlighting the zenith of worldly authority. Most Protestant reformers, like Zwingli, Luther, Melanchthon, Hooker, and Calvin, acknowledged man to be both a member of the church and subject to temporal authority, capable of reason and faith, where he is instructed by reason concerning his conduct in the temporal realm, and by the word of God in the spiritual realm (Melanchthon 2014, 2024; Hottinger 1856; Hooker 1888; Strauss and Cropsey 1987; Zwingli 2024). Yet, despite being a member of both realms, man is ultimately seen to be subordinate to the dictates of Scripture, "Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's Sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by Him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good" (1 Peter 2:13–14, NKJV). This is one of the key texts cited by Protestant reformers to support the divine foundation of the state and thus the primacy of the spiritual. Indeed, Luther contemplates temporal governance as God's precious jewel and a gift as indispensable as life itself (*Luther's Works*, Luther 1967).

Furthermore, this assertion has to be understood in the context of the Protestant rejection of, among other things, the authority of the Pope, the traditional Roman Catholic Church, the canon law of the Church, and the authority of the episcopal courts. Here, the rejection initiated with Luther's Ninety-Five Theses against Indulgences signifies not just the denunciation of the Roman Catholic Church and its ecclesiastical order. More profoundly significant is that this was an unconscious revolt against the very structure of thing that Protestants were defending: Christianity (i.e., discourse concerning the proper interpretation of the Holy Scripture). In other words, it was 'the cunning of reason' rejection of Christianity itself. Protestant reformers would have, no doubt, seldom thought that they were undermining the very pillar they were standing on and defending. In fact, the inescapable question concerning the jurisdictions of the two kingdoms and the indispensable need to address such matters only proved to be an irreversible progression, though unintentional, toward the ascendancy of the temporal realm. The more the apologists deliberated on this matter, with reason (i.e., to make one's position agreeable to reason), the further this process of deliberation undermined the rational and the divine basis of Christianity.

One revealing mark of this revolt involves the issue concerning the interpretation of Holy Scripture, for this had significant implications for matters concerning salvation. At a glance, there may appear to be nothing noteworthy about this obvious topic, yet what interests us here is that it directs us toward a different interpretation of man's endowment, a residual from the previous humanist movement that would attain its saliency and have a monumental effect on the position of Christianity in the years ahead. What the interpretation debate indicates is less about the Protestant attempt to reject the conventional Catholic interpretation of the Bible, in which man's salvation rests on the ecclesiastical doctrine with the Church as the intermediary, and more about man's assertion of his freedom. Indeed, for Milton, "it is by God, too, that peoples assert their liberty" (Dunning 1905, p. 243).

This is a salient point, because to assert that it is not the Church's injunction but each person's ability to glean the message of the Holy Scripture to attain grace and faith for salvation, indicates man's capacity to reason and the belief that he is organically endowed with reason. And because he is the possessor of reason, he has the capability to choose to interpret Scripture for himself, i.e., "the variety of possible scriptural interpretations" (Mortimer 2021, p. 71). Man now has direct access to God. It hints at the egalitarian nature of the Reformation, where anyone can access God, and everyone is equal before God by virtue of possessing the ability to reason. Reason liberates man from the clutches of superstition, blind dogmas, and regressive beliefs. It is what makes man free, gives him agency, choice, and control over his fate, his destiny. That is to say, liberty is the "birthright" of men (Dunning 1905, p. 244), or, for Dante, God's "greatest gift" to mankind. And because he is free, he uses his reason to choose to find out for himself the meaning behind the Word of God. After all, in the words of Milton, "Reason is but choosing" (Dunning 1905, p. 244). Indeed, reformers like Zwingli, Melancthon, Calvin, and Hooker, for instance, gave great reverence to reason (Hottinger 1856; Hooker 1888; Melancthon 2014; Calvin 1909), while others, like Luther, though ambivalent toward it, saw reason as useful for earthly affairs, much like the perspectives of early Christian apologists such as Tertullian (Jedin 1993; Luther 2024; Carty 2017; Strauss and Cropsey 1987). Pithily put, man is free because he is a being organically endowed with reason. It is perhaps not erroneous to infer that this notion of interpretation is an elementary reflection of what was to be fully developed in the Enlightenment period and beyond: the idea of people as the sole authors of their civil society (just as they are the authors of interpretations of Scripture), an idea embodied in Hobbes' concept of the state with sovereignty as the embodiment of the people constituting the civil society. For seldom can we expect ideas to abruptly appear like the goddess Minerva, springing forth from the forehead of Jupiter fully grown and armored. In actuality, rudimentary aspects of what at present appears obvious originally emerge in a form that might perhaps seem unrelated to their later, fully matured form. This is the crux of the interpretation dispute, the underlying force shaping and directing the course of the Reformation movement.

One profound implication of believing in man's organic capacity to reason and, therefore, liberty, is the opposition to all forms of hierarchy or authority, whether secular or spiritual. Liberty implies a form of equality among men (see Mortimer 2021): 'all are equal', or to employ Milton's words, "all men naturally were born free" (Dunning 1905, p. 242). Liberty gives man agency over his destiny, which he can attain by employing the tools of reason that are natural to him, thus jettisoning the need for any external authority, the Christian God included. It led to what Burckhardt (1990) would call the development of the 'individual' who would go on to occupy a central place in the maturation process of the entity that would replace Christianity as the organizing principle of Western society. What we find here are the elementary or preparatory forms of what we today call the secular-sovereign state or, simply, the state. Such a development during the Reformation made salient the notion of the state that would come to symbolize man's capacity to reason. The state, therefore, simultaneously embodies man's liberty, control, equality, and right, all of which are in turn underpinned by his capacity to reason. It is reason that spurs to life all these elements, more profoundly reflected in Hobbes' works and the broader Enlightenment movement. In this way, the reformers "made at least an indirect contribution to the modern idea of the state as an omnipotent power" (Baylor 2013, p. 228). Skinner, in this regard, succinctly writes, "the acceptance of the modern idea of the State presupposes that political society is held to exist solely for political purposes. The endorsement of this secularized viewpoint remained impossible as long as it was assumed that all temporal rulers had a duty to uphold godly as well as peaceable government. . . this in turn means

that the religious upheavals of the Reformation made a paradoxical yet vital contribution to the crystallising of the modern, secularized concept of the State” (Skinner 1978b, p. 352). It is indeed a difficult task to express it any more clearly than this.

There is also no doubt that the brutal and internecine religious war, entwined with the politics of expediency and opportunism that ensued, did little good for many, if not at least for the prominent men of Europe, who experienced the worst of humanity to become apologists for Christianity. Thus, for instance, the Catholic response to the Reformation resulted in the emergence of figures such as Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), among others. The leading Catholic figures of the Counter-Reformation focused on countering derisive attacks by primarily emphasizing the role of reason. After all, regardless of one’s inclination or doubts (such as those of John of the Cross, Peter Canisius, and Teresa of Avila) about reason, one’s viewpoint must be made intelligible to others. That is why, for example, the Jesuits, one of the outcomes of the Counter-Reformation, placed great emphasis on education to defend the Catholic faith from Protestants ideas. This was considered essential since, in their *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) and *De Legibus* (1612), Ignatius and Suárez, respectively, viewed education as a way to inculcate reason in defending the faith (Ignatius 1883; Suárez 1944). These developments enabled the Jesuits to develop their own treatises, extending beyond their response to the Protestants and also shaping their own political discourses concerning secular spheres (Hopfl 2009). Similarly, Bellarmine, in defending his faith, also attempted to demonstrate that Catholic beliefs and doctrines are in harmony with reason (see, Bellarmine’s (2012, *On Temporal and Spiritual Authority*, and 2016, *Controversies of the Christian Faith*)).

Likewise, the Council of Trent’s decree, intended to clarify Catholic doctrines and counter Protestant beliefs, recognized, albeit hesitantly, the value of reason as a useful tool for apologetics, understanding grace, and managing the Church’s disciplinary affairs, among other purposes (Jedin 1957, 1961, 1993). What these illustrative events demonstrate is that notwithstanding the position one took during this period, the fundamental role of reason remained significant and cannot be understated. It is the one common element that connects all figures and groups, regardless of whether they are reformers or counter-reformers. What is more, human reason served as the foundation for their respective treatises, the same tool that both Protestants and Catholic reformers, as well as secular apologists, relied on. And as Europe struggled through the turbulent periods of the religious wars that engulfed the Reformation era, we observe the rising tide of reason sealing the fate of Christianity in Europe and the Western world.

The Enlightenment period’s confidence in reason makes the humanist period’s stupendous confidence in man’s ability to attain excellence appear conservative and restrained. In addition, most of the crucial leitmotifs from the Reformation period, namely liberty, control, equality, and right, are brought to their fullest realization, in the modern sense, rendering the question concerning the jurisdiction of the two kingdoms, and hence the subject of salvation, superfluous.

5. The Enlightenment

Similar to the previous periods, we observe the invisible hands of reason shaping the progression of the Enlightenment, the consequence of which we bear witness to: the post-Christian West. Enlightenment represented an emblem of humanity’s coming of age, as Kant (1784) would describe in his essay on ‘*What is Enlightenment?*’ It was generally seen to be man’s emancipation from error and ignorance that imprisoned humanity for most part of its history. It was above all a mental liberation that altered man’s habit of thinking, general patterns of feeling and behavior, i.e., a “revolution in thought” (Porter 1990, p. 11).

This revolution in thought reveals what Kant (1784), citing the Latin poet Horace, describes as the spirit of ‘dare to know’ (*Sapere aude*). The varied figures of this Age of Reason, a somewhat reductionist and misleading term, shared a general commitment to denouncing the old regimes, superstition, ignorance, and religious dogmas, as well as criticizing the errors of the clergy, while cheering the forces of human emancipation through reason, education, and science. Thus, reason alone renders man free to attain true knowledge of himself, his society, and his nature, as well as that of the cosmos (Porter 1990). This is what allowed Voltaire to mount a relentless attack against religion, or Diderot and D’Alembert to describe enlighteners or *philosophes* (philosophers), so they were known, as individuals who dared to think for themselves, trampling on all that enslaves men to the shackles of ignorance, error, prejudice, and superstition (Porter 1990).

One consequential outcome of this emancipation of man was the emancipation of the individual, a different view of man developed during the previous centuries (Gay 1973; Burckhardt 1990). In the context of the Enlightenment, the individual man is placed at the forefront—even more so than for the Italian humanists. This view must also be understood within the context of the new advances being made in the field of sciences that led many to profoundly address fundamental concerns about the nature of being human (Kadane 2024). Newtonian physics, along with the advancement of new sciences such as astronomy and cosmology, largely driven by Galileo and Kepler, and Descartes’ mathematical discoveries, among numerous other scientific achievements, cast intense doubt on the verity of the Bible. Especially when reason was applied to inspect the verity of the latter, numerous contradictions and errors that were not agreeable with reason arose, creating misgivings about the veracity of the Word of God (Porter 1990). Armed with reason, this ‘dare to know’, ‘dare to think’ attitude eroded Christianity as the foundational principle of social organization, and as the basis of life and meaning. Instead, these were now to be founded on a new principle: the principle of reason and science that would allow individuals to attain a secular heaven, utopia, in this life. This meant conjuring new forms of civil societies, i.e., states, constituted by free individuals of equal standing, where happiness and justice can be attained in this life, because the spiritual realm, overseen by the incorporeal God, had failed.

Such a defining moment, marked by advancements in the field of human knowledge, depicted ‘man’, more precisely the newly emancipated individual, as the master of his own fate, capable of instituting endless progress and establishing a just world. Thus, we find Helvetius and Condillac asserting “man [to be] his own maker” (Porter 1990, p. 20). In a word, *control* over the events of the world and life. This rational and scientific investigation of man replaced the sacred history of the Bible with an anthropological history of man that depicted mankind evolving from the savage ‘state of nature’ condition to civilization, indicating the “secular ‘perfectibility’ of man” (Porter 1990, p. 18). Most importantly, perhaps, this natural-anthropological view of man rendered Christianity, with its belief in the divine creation of the universe and man’s sinful nature, obsolete. Indeed, it proved a thumping manner of relegating divine providence to the realm of fantasy and superstition. Why do we need God when the history of the world and man can be elucidated without any reference to the divine? This allowed for the exceedingly inventive and widely accepted idea of the state of nature as an explication of the human condition, which is fully and compellingly expressed in Hobbes’ works.

Hobbes’, along with many earlier thinkers’ (see Skinner 2018), anthropological (‘state of nature’) explanation of secular society and authority was not exclusively political in character or purpose. It was an oblique reference and, most importantly, an avowal to put an end to the debate concerning the jurisdiction of the two kingdoms, and thus the question concerning salvation. What this did was to assert, indicative of the spirit

of enlightenment, in no uncertain terms that the secular has triumphed and has full jurisdiction over the temporal as well as spiritual realms. This state of nature enunciation of human nature and civil society indicates the vindication of the secular over the spiritual, suggesting that there is no room for superstition, such as Christianity, in determining how free individuals arrange and lead their lives. To be free, or to be at liberty, entails the absence of restraints,—indeed, of any external hindrance to one’s desires (Skinner 2025).

This line of reasoning had a monumental implication for the discourse concerning the spiritual and the temporal realm, which we have been following throughout this investigation. The implication was that because liberty requires freedom from any external restraints, this ‘external’ constitutes not just the temporal powers but, importantly, divine authority too. Individuals are free even from the restraints and limits of the Christian God—similar to the Italian humanists’ revolt against the dictates of *fortuna* or the reformers’ revolt against the hegemony of the Catholic Church—thereby avowing a sense of control, and hence, choice over one’s fate, because one is considered to be free. With this, gone are the moral limits and restraints that enslaved individuals with standards too demanding, given man’s questionable nature. Thus, the state of nature adroitly captured and represented this new condition. And it was not long before Hobbes declared the state (i.e., civil society), figuratively represented by the Leviathan, as the “*Mortall God*, to which we owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence” (Hobbes 1997, chap. XVII, p. 95, italics in original). In no uncertain terms, Hobbes essentially declared what Nietzsche was to declare two and a half centuries later: that ‘God is dead’ or, in our context, Christianity is dead. With Christianity now dead, man is emancipated from all restraints—what Berlin (2002) would term “negative freedom”. Certainly, liberty today is equated with this liberty in the negative sense, meaning being free from external constraints (de Dijn 2020; Skinner 2025).

The space left by this death of Christianity or the Christian God was not left vacant. More precisely, in the early decades of this period, we see Christianity and its Immortal Christian God replaced by a secular-mortal god (i.e., the sovereignty of the state) for a secular religion (i.e., the state) with its own secular scripture (i.e., the social contract or, in modern-day parlance, the constitution), paralleling the triune God. This secular religion is still a religion, minus the sacredness, since individual members of this religion are liberated from all moral constraints that Christianity imposed on its members. What is more, the secular god or the sovereignty of the state, first developed by Bodin (1992) in his work *On Sovereignty* (1576) and brought to its fullest development by Hobbes, emulates the ‘Immortal’ Christian God in that it stands above everything else and is the possessor of absolute power that is perpetual and, according to Schmitt (2007), is the one that decides the exception (see also, Kalyvas 2008), while the secular scripture, call it the social contract or constitution, is sacred if only because it reflects man’s capacity for self-governance, autonomy, and control. As a consequence, individuals naturally endowed with liberty freely consent to organize into a civil society (paralleling religious community) maintained by the sovereign, i.e., the ‘Mortall’ secular god, for the pursuance of their individual desires, unlike Christianity that denounced such earthly pursuits. As we can observe, this structure of things (i.e., state, sovereignty, and contract) is similar to the Christian concept of the triune God. This is because, as Skinner ably clarifies, “Hobbes wants us to think of the state as a kind of God. Just as the Anglican theologians of his time maintain that we can only hope for religious fulfilment if we accommodate ourselves to the will of the triune nature of the immortal God, so Hobbes analogously argues that we can only attain fulfilment in civil life if we accommodate ourselves to the will of the triune state” (Skinner 2018, p. 300).

Perhaps the most profound implications of this new secular religion, i.e., the state, is the reversal of values upon which man and his world were to be measured. The new

system emerging during the Enlightenment period was founded on principles that were denounced and debased by Christianity, such as boundless faith in reason, conviction in limitless progress, fetishism of power, unbridled indulgence, and passion for pride and ambition (Crocker 1963). Rather than condemning them, the secular god released man from these bondages of religious restraints and the accompanying angst by making that which was ‘base’ the basis of enlightened human understanding, redefining the relationship between individuals, between individual and society, and between individual and nature.

The outcome is a paradoxical formulation embodied, for instance, in Mandeville’s (1989) *Fable of the Bees*, where private vices beget public benefits. Or Smith’s (1993) contention that selfish behavior led by the ‘invisible hand’ results in the common good. Or Jeremy Bentham’s pleasure/pain principle that would allow for the greatest happiness for the greatest number (Bentham and Mill 1987). Or Cesare Beccaria’s method of deterring crime through the pain involved in punishment, a modification of the pleasure/pain principle. Christian apologists would have no doubt deplored the advocacy of private vices, self-interested behavior, pleasure, and the rational selfishness principles. Yet, this is a secular religion with its own values that dictate what is desirable for its members, just as Christianity did for its members. Indeed, Locke, for instance, denied the sinful nature of man, rather believing humans to acquire their moral values through experience. Although benign, Locke’s *tabula rasa* implicitly presupposes the irrelevance of divine providence in the creation of man, and hence the denial of any acts of divine authority in the earthly affairs of man, notwithstanding his religious perspectives outlined in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). And if moral values are acquired through experience and not innate, then it is only a short step to suppose, like Lamarck and Darwin, that mankind is capable of adapting itself to a changing environment and values, for progress brings vicissitudes, and progress supposes perpetual quests toward excellence. It is this belief in the idea of progress that conjured the spirits of the French and the American Revolutions (Bederman 2008; Israel 2010, 2014).

Suffice to say that the Enlightenment stands as the culmination of the developments of the two preceding periods: the Italian humanist movement and the Reformation. Plain in this period is the rejection of Christianity as a valid organizing principle, while at the same time, we see the ascendancy of the secular realm and its jurisdiction over the earthly sphere (Whatmore 2013). From these developments, Europe enters the modern period. However, here the forces that underpin and shape the emergence of the secular state become more pronounced, particularly with the arrival of the industrial revolution, an inevitable outcome of applying human reason.

6. The “Artificial”, the Secular, and the ‘Cunning of Reason’

The post-Christian West is the consequential outcome of the dismantling of the spiritual realm and the zenith of the temporal-secular realm. This condition is not final, for seldom can we foresee the cunning of reason, just as the protagonists on both sides of the camp over the past centuries would have scarcely imagined Europe and the West to dismantle its Judeo-Christian foundations. The triumph of the temporal realm highlighted the saliency of secular religion, the state, which strives to achieve broad, and often conflicting, social (economic, racial, religious, and sexual) justice and equality, all in pursuit of its perceived noble goal of creating a heaven of a secular nature, i.e., happiness. Christianity and its incorporeal God have failed to dispense justice, equality, and bring salvation to mankind. And in the pursuit of secular heaven, individuals endowed with liberty conjured the state, with its own sovereign secular god, for the realization of this paradise,—a paradise in which equality is accomplished, justice is administered fairly, religious conflicts

are absent, and individuals are given the fullest opportunity to pursue their self-interest, which, as in Mandeville and Adam Smith's formulations, will lead to the common good. That is to say, maximizing happiness for the largest number of people, as the Utilitarians would insist. This, indeed, is the salvation, the promise, of the state.

In the erosion of the Christian foundation, what takes its place is the secular state. This withering of Christianity affords the political, the emblematic feature of the state, to occupy the place previously held by the divine (Del Noce 2014). The state represents, to use Weber's formulation, the 'disenchantment of the world' (*die entzauberung der welt*) (Marotta 2023; Mishima 2019), and thus the irrelevance of the divine in the post-Christian rational schemes of things. Without any reference to the divine, the happiness, justice, and equality (as commonly understood by most) that so elude the modern man and society can be attained in this life through man's own effort. It can be achieved through man's faith in reason, his ability to adapt to new surroundings as he progresses toward improving his conditions, and the conviction that, as a free being, he is the author of his fate by overcoming the unpredictable nature of the Christian God and *fortuna*. It is perhaps significant to conclude this examination by revisiting Hobbes' concept of the state and the sovereign, as it has profoundly captured the political and social imaginings of the West precisely because it vividly illustrates a new form of civil arrangement that has become central to our reflection about man and his condition.

In his introduction to the Leviathan, Hobbes speaks of the state as the "Artificiall Man", the sovereign as the "Artificiall Soul", and its laws and sense of justice or equity as "artificiall Reason and Will" (Hobbes 1997, Introduction, 9, italics in the original). What is of interest for our purpose is the term 'Artificiall' or artificial. Just as the state of nature is a fictional condition of man prior to society, conjuring an artificial state and a sovereign that is artificially willed by 'imagined' individuals, is the post-Christian West constructing a culture and civilization based on "artificiall" belief systems, one built on the destruction of its Judeo-Christian foundation? Can the West endure existential pressures both from within and without? These are consequential questions to consider, in light of the cultural conflicts that are becoming increasingly divisive, and how instrumental reasoning is taking the place of genuine deliberation and authentic associations, substituting them with transactional morals that debase the very fundamental values of humanists, reformists, and the *philosophes*.

This is perhaps revealed in the manner in which the modern secular state holds economics or the economy, i.e., the embodiment of transactional morals, to be sacred and absolute. It serves as the principal framework for comprehending every aspect of human relationships. The point here is that these examples serve as an ominous illustrative symptom of the West's post-Christian conditions. Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, portended the ascent of instrumental reasoning (*Zweckrationalität*), where efficiency, means, and transactional morality become the ultimate goal of reason, i.e., the Enlightenment project. In simply terms, reason ironically turns into a new kind of prison, a new form of social control, a new method of domination, and a new source of ignorance and error that imprisons humanity. They anticipated the ascension of instrumental reasoning as central to the Enlightenment's goal of mastering nature, dispelling myths (including religion), and the subsequent human need for self-preservation in the wake of Christianity's decline—a theme reminiscent of the Italian humanists, reformers, and the *philosophes*. They point to the logic of domination that is inherent in reason itself. This is merely the cunning of reason. Certainly, they did not refer to it in those exact terms, but they anticipated the cunning of reason, since it is reason that drove the Enlightenment project.

The decline of Christianity and the following affirmation of the secular state, following the Enlightenment's aim to control nature, removed barriers (Christians' belief in transcen-

dence, salvation, and mercy, for instance) that could resist pure instrumentalism. With religion convincingly dislodged, reason becomes fully dominating and purely instrumental. It merely asks, ‘what is the most efficient means to achieve a particular end?’, the essence here being the utility, fully self-preserving, and rational calculation. In short, dehumanization. Because it dehumanizes, it does not ask ‘what is good’ or ‘what is true?’ in a transcendent sense, which is the opposite of instrumental reasoning. The Enlightenment project’s advancement in reason not only dehumanizes but threatens to nullify the very idea of man itself (Horkheimer 1974). This is in addition to how man’s “autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his independent judgement appear to be reduced” (Horkheimer 1974, p. v).

The defining moments of the fifteenth-century Italian humanist movement, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment period, allow us to vividly trace the genealogy of the West’s post-Christian condition. Yet, the genealogy, in no uncertain terms, portends some menacing implications: the threat to the very concept of man. The liberation of the Western man and the secularization of his world enabled reason, paraphrasing Nietzsche, to reevaluate all values. Its drive toward pure instrumental reasoning, which dehumanizes, is just a short step away once Christianity is deprived of its divine providence. Stripped of his divine essence and spark, man become an instrument, a means to an end; one that can be represented mathematically through the utility function for something or someone else’s ends or preservation; and whose existence is solely based on what he can be used for. What is even more ominous is that this dehumanizing form of instrumental reasoning that threatens the idea of man becomes, in Gramsci’s words, ‘commonsense’: a sacred and absolute principle. Unaware that it is merely an ‘artificial’ value established for the sake of domination and control, “it aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 2).

In his march toward the ‘end of history’, man, guided by his boundless rationality, discarded meaning, replaced concepts with formulas, supplanted cause with rules and probability, usurped divine providence with transactional morals, and sacrificed senses (that which is natural) to reason (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). As the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contend, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 1). The triumphant calamity is not that the West has lost God or Christianity. Rather, in becoming purely instrumental with no other forces to check its drive to dominate, reason has lost its ability to question its own purpose. Given this calamity, the West perhaps requires a new Enlightenment to liberate itself once more from the cage of reason. Just as the Italian humanists and the reformers had the courage to question and critique that which was conventional, orthodox, and ignorant, a similar spirit to Horace’s ‘dare to know’ (*Sapere aude*) or the ‘revolution in thought,’ combined with the prudence of Christian faith, may provide a basis for deliberating the future trajectory of the West, which at present appears uncertain. Indeed, the “triumphant calamity” has broader implication extending beyond the West, affecting non-Western nations, particularly those in a secularizing mission. Modern history reveals the implications faced by nations that renounced religion: the communist Soviet Union and the Gulag, communist China and the millions who perished in the pursuit of a secular heaven, the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian genocide, and Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, among many others.

It is prudent to recall, as Dante reminds the West, that the greatest gift God, in His magnanimity, bestowed to man is the “freedom of the will”; and this freedom of the will is subservient to God Himself, not the intellect, i.e., the reason. Dante, a devout Christian, intensely shows through Beatrice’s lips the profundity of this freedom of the will expressed as authentic love that transcends any words—in this instance, Dante’s pure unsullied love for Beatrice. It is this concept of transcendence, which reason seldom can substitute, that elevates the idea of man to the divine, making him both divine and meaningful. Deprived of this, man is stripped of his humanity, hence dehumanized. The post-Christian condition of the West necessitates a return to the ideas of Italian humanist and Reformation (and Counter-Reformation) thinkers. In this sense, the post-Christian West may perhaps just be a temporary stop rather than the ultimate destination, for no one can predict what the cunning of reason may lead to. One principal discovery of this study is that since reason subjects everything to purely instrumental calculation and transactional logic, all things become mere means to an end. This means reason used (and exploited) the Italian humanist movement, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment as a means to achieve its aim: its inherent desire to dominate absolutely. All three movements, along with the humanists, Christian apologists, reformers, and *philosophes*, believed they were using reason as a tool, as an instrument to support their respective views. However, as it turns out, it was reason that used them as a tool, a means to achieve its goals. It used these movements to remove all barriers to its dominance, beginning with Christianity. Therefore, viewed from this lens, the post-Christian condition and the state, which brought about the former, functioned merely as means to achieve a particular aim of reason. With religion removed, the study conjectures, accounting for the ‘cunning of reason’, that the concept of the state will also be supplanted by another more comprehensive concept, which will also be superseded. And so, reason’s cycle of, to use Schumpeter’s words, creative destruction continues. Since reason is absolute and all-dominating, it cannot tolerate the existence of any transcendental universal concept that counters its totalitarian nature.

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