

*Faith and Freedom: The Christian Roots of American Liberty.* By Benjamin Hart. Lewis and Stanley. 1988.

**H**art's thesis follows: God, the Bible, true religion, and the federal relationship of primitive Christian congregations constitute the fountainhead of human rights, representative government, and the *Constitution of the United States*. This mighty stream goes underground during the early development of Catholicism (following the mistakes of Constantine and Augustine), but emerges with Wycliffe and Tyndale, and becomes an irresistible force in English Protestantism, particularly in the Puritan and Separatist traditions, from which it flows directly into New England with the Pilgrim Fathers and even into ostensibly Anglican Virginia. This stream of faith and thought, respecting the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and property, antedates the Enlightenment (owing it nothing) and largely declines deistic and secular philosophical contributions. Thus, the Framers of the *Constitution* brought pure, Protestant, Christian theism to bear on their political creation and in consequence gave Americans an inspired document whose provisions for the separation of religion and government were intended to protect religion from government (far more than vice versa), to prevent government from advancing one Christian sect over others, and to preclude a national (but not state) ecclesiastical establishments. The virtues and benefits of the *Constitution* together with the benefactions of biblically inspired capitalism, which have made America great, are now imperiled by skeptical, secular, pluralistic, moral relativists, found everywhere from the public schools to the Supreme Court, from the ACLU to universities (harboring revisionist historians), from liberal churches to socialists and communists, and worst of all, one supposes, to card-carrying secular humanists. Unless America awakens and returns to her spiritual roots, perdition awaits. This thesis calls to mind an old refrain.

*Reason Papers* No. 14 (Spring 1989) 184-189  
Copyright ©1989.

The eighth century Hebrew prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah), surveying the moral and religious conditions of their times, called on Israel to forsake her wicked ways and return to the pure paths of the Mosaic period when the children of Israel walked innocently with their god. Unfortunately, the eighth century prophets knew little or nothing of the thirteenth century (Moses' approximate time) except by rumor and tradition, not a little of which was distorted. To compound their confusion, these prophets were, morally speaking, well in advance of the Mosaic period, yet they were calling Israel back to what they mistook to have been an ideal time in religion and morals. Readers of Hart's book will be treated to similar confusions.

The concept of natural, inherent, universal human rights appears nowhere in the Bible. Conjugal rights are mentioned once in the New Testament (I *Cor.* 7:3), but only in passing and unrelated to the general subject. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (five large volumes including supplement) contains hundreds of entries (including a long one on slavery) but none on rights. Hart, not knowing Hebrew apparently and using only the King James Bible, does not know that 'eved means slave primarily, not the euphemistic "servant" of the King James. In the Old Testament human chattel could be capture in war (*Deut.* 20:10-14), purchased and inherited (*Lev.* 25:44), bred (*Ex.* 21:4), and acquired in the form of people unable to pay their debts (*II Kings* 4:1, *Neh.* 5:5). In the chapter following the Ten Commandments (in *Ex.* 20) comes information concerning a father's sale of his daughter into slavery (*Ex.* 21:7). A slave who is still alive a day or two after being beaten needs not be avenged (*Ex.* 21:21). None of this supports the notion that the Bible teaches inherent human rights.

Hart knows not that the Greek, *doulos*, means slave. Paul was well aware of slavery (I *Cor.* 7:22, 12:13; *Col.* 3:11), counseled slaves to obey their earthly masters in all things (*Col.* 3:22), and sent a particular slave back to his owner (see Philemon). Slavery was so much in his mind that he taught that human beings are either the slaves of Satan or of God (*Rom.* 6:16-23). In this portrayal of their condition, human beings have neither rights nor moral autonomy. The Bible's failure to condemn slavery (in Jesus' day the High Priest, no less, had slaves) and its failure even to introduce the concept of universal human rights leave Hart unsupported.

Moreover, biblical society was patriarchal, hierarchic, theocratic (under Samuel and Ezra), and monarchical (under Saul, David, and the Davidic dynasty in the Old Testament and under the Hasmoneans during the intertestamental period), not

democratic. To make matters worse for Hart, Jesus' teachings are set, in the synoptic gospels, in an eschatological (from *eschaton*, the end time) framework which anticipates a quick, cataclysmic end of the present, wicked world order (*Mk.* 13:24-33; *Acts* 2:17-21; *II Pet.* 3:3-10). Jesus disciples will not have time to evangelize all the towns of Israel (a small country) before the end comes (*Mt.* 10:23, *I Pet.* 4:7), some standing with him will not die before the heavenly kingdom arrives (*Mt.* 16:28; *Jas.* 5:8), the (then) current generation will not pass away before all these things are accomplished (*Mt.* 24:34; *Lk.* 21:32). Paul is so convinced of the speedy end of the present world order that he advises married Christians to abstain from sex with their spouses (*I Cor.* 7:28-31). Although it is unclear what the historical Jesus was about, it is clear that with such a world-view he felt little if any need to address the major social, economic, and political evils of his day and, according to the gospels, did not. He announced, rather, a time close at hand when God's perfect rule would break into the human sphere and when God's will would be done on earth as it was already being done in the heavens. If the parable of the talents (*Mt.* 25:15-30) seems to endorse capitalism, what is one to do with Jesus' command (in *Lk.* 6:30), "Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again."? If the statement (in *Mt.* 22:21), "Render...unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's," reveals Jesus' awareness of the differences between government and religion, how can one find out precisely who should get what? He does not say.

Paul's view of the proper relationship between Christians and the state, colored no doubt by his eschatology, was one maintaining the propriety of submission, servility, and political quietism (*Rom.* 13:1-4; *Titus* 3:1). John's gospel (19:11) and the first Petrine letter (2:13-14) agree. The Christian is simply to obey the authorities as ordained by God. If the Pilgrim Fathers and the Puritan Divines found political inspiration in the Bible for the construction of their compacts, covenants, and articles of confederation, they must have misread it as egregiously as Hart. The principal author of the *Declaration of Independence*, however, did not call for Christian submission to George III (à la Paul) but announced that it was the American people's right and duty to overthrow despotic government. The Framers of the *Constitution* were no more naive and Bible-believing in this particular than was Jefferson.

Hart thinks the congregational polity of New England's churches not only pointed forward to the federalism of the *Constitution* but also back to the primitive church. *Acts* 2:44-45 says of the

earliest congregating of Christians, And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. *Acts* 4:34-35 reinforces this early socialism which is never criticized by the author of *Acts* as unChristian. The leader of the developing Jerusalem Church (the earliest) was James, the brother of Jesus, a figure of such towering import that even Paul bent the knee to him (*Acts* 21:17-25). S.G. F. Brandon says (in *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity*, 1967, p. 165, n. 4), "The dynastic factor in the leadership of the primitive Christian movement has long been recognized." Although the New Testament provides no single polity (and none well worked out) for Christian congregations, hierarchies soon developed, the episcopal form of government becoming the norm. Hart merely announces, but gives no support for, his conviction that the primitive church was paradigmatic for American federalism.

It is common for "true believers" to fancy that all good things flow from their god through their religion. For example, it never occurs to Hart that Christianity may have acquired ideas and values not originally its own, may have baptized these (once alien) items, and passed them on as its own to unsuspecting believers. But this is precisely what has happened—and more than once. The *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (Vol. III, p. 17b) says, "The influence of Stoic thought came to fruition with the advent of Christianity." Hart seems not to know the importance of Stoicism in introducing the idea of natural law, based on cosmic reason, that transcends the posited laws of various times and places. The notion of natural law leads directly to the idea of natural rights, an idea of utmost importance to the Founding Fathers. That it came more from Stoicism than Christianity undercuts his thesis.

Moreover, he dismisses Aristotle on the ground that he had a god different from Scriptures'. Ernest Barker, who brought out a new translation of Aristotle's *Politics* in 1946 (Oxford University Press) wrote in the preface, "It inspired the political thought of Aquinas: that in turn inspired Hooker: Hooker in turn helped to inspire Locke; and the thought of Locke, with all its ancestry, largely inspired the general thought both of Britain and America in the realm of politics." While the Jews were still enmeshed in theocracy, Aristotle, in his *Politics* (Bk. IV, Chap. 14) was already inquiring into "the methods of establishing constitutions, in relation to the three powers—deliberative [i.e., legislative], executive, and judicial." Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "Most of the American state and federal constitutions were the work of college-educated

men who had studied political theory in Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Polybius, and other ancient writers and had given deep thought to problems of political reconstruction" (*The Oxford History of the American People*, p. 271).

The principal Founding Fathers (i.e., Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and J. Adams) were much more deistic than Hart cares to acknowledge and, therefore, opposed to religious (including Christian) superstition (see "Deism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 333-34). The *Constitution* they helped in various ways to write marks a sharp break with the tenor of earlier covenants ranging from *The Mayflower Compact* to *The Northwest Ordinance* in which religious goals and theological requirements, such as believing in the Trinity, are prominent.

The *Preamble* to the *Constitution* contains no religious goal among the six enumerated. Its main body contains no article of religious faith and begs no theological questions by presupposing, acknowledging, or invoking any deity whatsoever. Scriptural language and theological concepts never invade its pages. Prayer and pious acts remain beneath its gaze, and it no more requires theism for citizenship than it tolerates religious tests for office holding. In the *Bill of Rights*, religion is treated generically, no more favor being shown to Christianity than to any religion, to say nothing of favoring one sect of Christians above other sects. What is most astonishing about the pervasive secularity of the *Constitution* is not that the Fathers left all traces of Christianity out of it but that they also left all traces of their Deism out of it. As it stands, it could easily have been written by atheists.

The original version of the little known *Treaty of Tripoli*, written by Joel Barlow and signed in Tripoli while Washington was still President but presented to the Senate by President John Adams and duly ratified on June 10, 1797 says in Part:

As the government of the United States of America, is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity of Musselmen [Muslims]; and as the said States never have entered into any war or acts of hostility against any Mahametan nation; it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries [i.e., the United States and Tripoli].

This treaty was clearly designed to allay certain Muslims' fears that our government might treat Muslim states with Christian

prejudice. However, it could as easily have been designed to allay Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto, or any other religion's fears. The treaty simply expresses the truth, particularly from the standpoint of the New Testament.

Hart's book is neither a serious inquiry nor a scholarly work, but, rather, a case of special pleading which results in a Fundamentalist tract, albeit a fat one. It is also a futile work. The vast majority of Americans, especially of educated Americans, is not going to return to the fictitious, even if spiritual, roots Hart fancies he has found in God, the Bible, true religion, and the presumed federalism of the primitive church.

DELOS B. MCKOWN

*Auburn University*