
American Culture: A Story

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My goal in this essay is less to impart a specific teaching than to tell a story. This story, I first should point out, is not a myth made up for didactic purposes, as so many such stories tend to be. It is rather a *true* story, one rooted in things we know about history, and about America and Americans; about where we came from, how we were made, and, from that, what and who we are. To the extent that there is a formal argument here, it is simply this: our lives have meaning and coherence on account of the larger stories of which they are a part. Thus, American society—our lives in common as Americans—is possible only to the extent that we share and seek to live up to a common, overarching story rooted in memory, custom, and current practice.

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Every story needs a beginning. But in a sense beginnings are arbitrary. For example, I could begin with the story of creation; after all, man's creation in the image of God has many implications for America. I also could tell a slightly shorter story by beginning with the first sin, the fall of man and its implications for our (sinful) nature. Or I could begin with Abraham's covenant with the one true God, which made the Israelites "chosen."

But, in the interest of brevity, I will skip just a bit further forward, to Mount Sinai. Following Russell Kirk,¹ we can pick the story up here because it set the Israelites apart from their neighbors in a politically crucial way. I refer, of course, to the handing down by God of the Ten Commandments; a transformative, defining moment for the Israelites, and for those whom they influenced.

¹ *The Roots of American Order* (Malibu: Pepperdine University Press, 1974).

Some point out that the Ten Commandments were not all that different from other codes, like the Code of Hammurabi. But that is not the point. The point is that it was *Hammurabi's* code, a law handed down by a supposedly sacred *political* power, who saw himself as the *creator* of right and wrong—just as, I would argue, our liberal friends tend to see both law and government. Moses, on the other hand, gave the Israelites *God's* law, and thereby established a higher law tradition, according to which worldly governors can be judged by standards higher than their own will.

Again in the interest of brevity, I will just mention some other parts of the story: man's discovery of the powers of reason in Greece; our training in the virtues of republican government in Rome; I even will skip over the utterly transformative moment in a later Jerusalem, when God saved man's transcendent humanity by Himself becoming Man, and, through His death and resurrection, making clear our duty to love one another as ourselves. I instead will move to a lesser known part of the story, set in early medieval Rome. For it was here that the Pope won the struggle with the Holy Roman Emperor, and gained the right to appoint bishops, which formerly had been appointed by the emperor himself.

So what?

So, this victory *institutionalized* Mount Sinai. It set up a separate religious authority, independent of the state, which would tell kings they

were behaving wrongly, even excommunicate them and tell their subjects they owed them no allegiance. That investiture struggle institutionalized the higher law tradition and made natural law the standard of all governments and societies in the west. It made possible the Great Charter of Britain, which guaranteed the rights of the church, of the barons, and of the towns, in the face of a centralizing king. And that charter—and others like it on the continent—made possible the flourishing of towns, guilds, parishes, families, and other associations, which gained their own chartered rights, along with the ability and will to defend them.

Strong associations meant a multiplicity of authorities, protecting both communal and independent action through legal and customary rights. They also constituted a diversity of groups within which one acted, and to which one could look for protection. This diversity, these groups, and these rights came into bad odor in the era of absolutism and centralization. But, for a variety of reasons we need not go into, in Britain in particular there was resistance to this centralizing trend, which said "there can be only one sovereign, one source of power and authority." Instead, there continued a healthy—though unfortunately difficult and at times bloody—competition among social and political authorities.

It was in the midst of this competition that the first settlers came to America. Many of them were seek-

ing money. *They* had troubles. Others, for a long time the more successful settlers, were seeking to set up communities of faith and virtue, to follow the way of their Lord in common. Most of the colonies had their own charters, as well as an ocean keeping British authority safely distant, and allowing them to become self-governing local societies, themselves made up of largely self-governing communities. Self-government became second nature.

There was an abortive attempt to change all this, which we tend to forget, but which earlier Americans kept vividly in their minds. In 1688, as he was trying to consolidate power in Britain, James II also sought to consolidate power in America, erasing borders, dismissing legislatures, and assuming full sovereignty. The colonists resisted, fiercely. I skip over the rather nasty anti-Catholicism that was a part of this resistance because that is what adults do; because the fact that a sin was involved does not mean that it was either the cause of, or caused by, the event. The point is, the Glorious Revolution became a defining moment for Americans because it was not simply a British event; it also was American. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 showed, to both peoples, the increasing power of charters, and of petitions of grievances charging kings with violating inherited rights, to defend pre-existing ways of life.

Americans quickly returned to their rather pastoral lives of self-government, commerce and wor-

ship. But the consolidation issue came back again. The Stamp Act was imposed on American colonies in 1765. And this act was preceded by a multitude of statements from Britain: statements to the effect that Americans had no rights. This argument held that America was a conquered territory, like Ireland, which the British ruled without reference to any statements or charters of rights, and that even the charters in America could be revoked at will.

To this Americans responded with two kinds of arguments, often intertwined. First was the argument that the charters themselves were inviolable; that they were binding on both parties and could be revoked only by mutual agreement. Second was the argument that, even without the charters, Americans held important rights through the common law, and also on account of their humanity. It became increasingly important for Americans to make this second argument as the British government maintained and increased its insistence that charters could be revoked at will by the (British) sovereign that granted them. Americans like Stephen Hopkins² and James Otis³ disputed this centralizing ideology. To do so, they had to go back to first princi-

² "The Rights of Colonies Examined," in Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing During the Founding Era* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), 45-61.

³ "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved," reprinted in Bruce Frohnen, ed., *The American Republic: Primary Sources* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 2002), 119-34.

ples, talking about a state of nature and its implications for civil government.

Britain's centralizing argument had been around for centuries, and had been disputed at least since the Middle Ages by canon (or church) lawyers. These canon lawyers pointed out that secular government was established by societies that had a prior moral claim that could be considered in a state of nature with the right to set up limited governments for their own purposes. This was the traditional argument used by, for example, John of Paris and John Locke.

Colonists repeated this age-old argument, adding to it a nuanced appreciation for the importance of the colonial charters, supported by a long history of practice, a tradition or custom that itself had come to hold prescriptive moral power. But the British did not listen, and eventually it became necessary to take up arms, and to declare that,

These united Colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is and ought to be totally dissolved.⁴

Through a legal Declaration of Independence, the several colonies came together for the specific purpose of making a formal separation from Great Britain. And this they did in order to preserve the many

rights and traditions—enumerated in an extensive list of grievances—threatened by a centralizing Parliament in imperial Great Britain.

Of course, the war eventually was won, but the ensuing peace proved troublesome under a confederation which lacked the power to raise funds and establish orderly relations and commerce among states. Thus there was a constitutional convention, which solidified certain national powers, setting up a second government in addition to the states; a second, more central but still direct authority with certain limited powers to keep the states together in peace and prosperity. At this point, though much else has happened since—though the story has continued—we generally say that America has been “founded.”

Again, the story is not new. It has been told many times before, and much better than I have just done. But it is important to re-tell the story for several reasons.

First, because it is true. Despite Americans' subjection in recent decades to an almost maniacal will to ignorance regarding our past, the past was and is real, and failure to learn of it deprives us of the full range of knowledge required to act morally and wisely in our present situation.

My second, related reason for re-telling the story stems from its continuing relevance. The story of the development of our public culture sets forth who we are as Americans, not just where we came from, but who we are, in that it tells us what

⁴ “Declaration of Independence,” reprinted in Frohnen, *American Republic*, 190-91.

institutions, beliefs, and practices made up our society and the character of its people in its formative moments. The story of our people, of their development in cultural, social, and political terms, sets the pattern of our lives as Americans. It presents to us a coherent mode of life to which we must conform ourselves, our actions, our beliefs, and our characters, if our lives are to make sense.

I also wanted to re-tell the story because, taken as an abstraction, it frightens some people, which is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it leads us to ignore or even reject our story, the narrative that helps give meaning to our lives as Americans. It flattens our tradition, narrowing *us* by defining us in purely political, ideological terms. Thus it is necessary to address some of these stated fears.

First is the fear that the story is racist.

Why racist? Because it is a *particular* story. It is a story of *America's British Culture*,⁵ to cite the title of one of Kirk's books.

But:

(1) There is nothing in this story about superiority or inferiority based in any inborn characteristic. It is not a biological story, but a cultural one.

(2) It is not even a story of one, single, culture, but of the *development* of a culture. Israelites, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Italians, and many others participated in this growth, whether or not their particular nations existed at the relevant time.

The story merely tells us how we got where we are, or at least where we were at the end of the eighteenth century. It says nothing about white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans being the only people who are worthy of ordered liberty.

And here is where the second, in a way more fundamental fear comes in. That fear? That, because this story does not put abstract political rights at its center, it leaves people defenseless in the face of unjust governors and of unjust traditions in particular.

One variation of this argument points back to the racism charge, claiming that only abstract rights arguments produced an end to slavery, and so to downplay those arguments is to accept slavery. In this connection I would note that Americans today have become accustomed to speaking in the language of abstract rights, but I am not at all certain that this habit is salutary. I am certain, moreover, that this habit developed after slavery was abolished. Slavery was abolished for all kinds of reasons—philosophical, economic, and military, for example. My own view is that the most important motivation was moral, that is, a basic disgust at the brutality of the system of chattel slavery. But, be that as it may, we must put this argument concerning causation to one side, because it is fundamentally unanswerable. To say “without x we would not have achieved y” is subjective at best; history simply is not that simple; it cannot be so rationalistically dissected.

⁵ (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993).

Better, then, to ask whether the actual rights about which people are concerned can be protected only by abstract, universal statements. And here I would point out that custom, tradition, and good old charters have a much longer and better record of providing actual protections to actual people than do abstract, universal statements. Americans, I would argue, were much better served by traditional rights protecting them in their families, churches, local associations, and local governments, than they are now by an unlimited state that chooses to define (and redefine) rights for its people, no matter how broad those definitions may be. Better to secure a *chartered* right against slavery, such as that secured in the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution, than to insist, *ad infinitum*, that one's reading of natural rights should be accepted by all and enforced through court decisions.

The final fear I want to address brings us directly to what often is termed "Americanism." That fear is that the story of America, even if it does not declare non-Americans inherently inferior, declares them effectively inferior because one cannot simply *choose* one's culture. That is, because our story rests on an understanding of ourselves as culturally embedded, it must, on this view, say that all people from different cultures are doomed, that their characters already have been formed, so that they are not worthy of becoming, and could not become, Americans.

First let me point out what is true in this statement: there are limits to

the capacity of cultural assimilation. It is very difficult for people from radically different cultures to become "American." Whether Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, people from cultures formed by religions outside our civilization are going to have trouble accepting and living Judeo-Christian, western virtues.

But this does not mean,

(a) That these people are not possessed of fundamental human dignity, being created in the image of God,

(b) That we must (or should, or even have a moral right to) be at war with these peoples, seeking to destroy their culture to replace it with our own,

(c) That there are not a multitude of cultures with which we share fundamental values, or even

(d) That people from radically different cultures cannot, in limited numbers and with effort, assimilate.

Rather, assertion of our culturally embedded nature constitutes a simple recognition that culture comes from the cult; that societies are shaped by their religious practices, which in turn shape social institutions, beliefs, and customs, all of which shape the groups within which we live, and form our characters.

And this leads me to my central conclusion: that the story of our people provides a more open and accepting vision of Americanism, if you will, than any ideological argument or creed can provide. Those who reduce our story to the exposition before the first act (John Locke) and the heart of the story (a couple

of sentences about abstract rights taken from the second paragraph of the document formally severing ties with Great Britain) endanger our rights and our culture.

The Declaration of Independence, and the notion of universal rights that forms a part of it, is important. The document was necessary for a formal separation with Great Britain, and contains a recognition of the dignity and value of man, without which charters *could be* revoked at will by those in power. But none of this can mean anything concrete unless it is translated into historically relevant custom.

Due process, for example, was never an abstract right. Our right to due process stems from Magna Charta's declaration that Britons shall not be judged except by the law of the land—that is, local, customary procedures. King Edward I (1272-1307) unwittingly furthered these rights through his systematic re-appraisal of local charters. This re-appraisal required establishment of a systematic procedure for determining whether charters existed and/or had been violated, and ended up cementing Britons' procedural rights. Sir Edward Coke termed the resulting procedures "due process." The abstract right to due process is just that, an abstraction from concrete practice. Take away the practice, and the abstraction becomes meaningless.

America, likewise, was never an abstraction, at least up through the founding era. America was a *people*; a people with a history. It was an

important part of western civilization in which people, in their variety of local groups, led lives of ordered liberty, self government, and virtue. If we allow Americans' history to be reduced to a few sentences, no matter how important, we allow that people to be reduced to the pawns of centralizing politicians. Those statements become the God-terms of a civil religion: an ideology according to which the "one true government" holds the keys to paradise. Even if that government claims to stand for liberty, even if those statements are all about rights, the result is a narrow, political, utopian fervor that leaves no room for the multiplicity of authoritative groups that actually defend our rights. Our rights depend on a culture that recognizes a law higher than any political sovereign, including one committed to abstract rights; a culture in which each of us owes duties to our churches, our families, our local associations, as well as to the government; a culture in which each of these communities has its own rights.

A key problem with abstract statements of universal rights lies precisely in their rhetorical power. They give to those in positions of political authority the tools by which to convince the people that they can achieve good lives through purely political action. Yet our political actions simply are not the most important part of our life or our character. They are limited in their proper purpose, which is that of achieving peace and good order such that we may pursue life in our fundamental

social groups, free from molestation. To seek more from political actions will succeed only in undermining our natural connections, and with them our peace and order.

The story of America and Americans is one of people leading social lives within the constitutive local groups or “plurality of social authorities” Robert Nisbet showed are necessary for ordered liberty.⁶ It is a story in which individuals found meaning for their lives by becoming a part of things larger than themselves, conforming to the distinctive virtues, purposes, and needs of a variety of smaller communities and stories making up America, as well as to the larger story of which they are a part.

There remains one telling criticism of the story of American culture to be addressed: that it is no longer relevant. Self-evidently, we have strayed far from the traditions that formed our people. Why, then, attempt to resurrect a story that no longer informs active, live custom? Even those who agree that current trends point toward the death of our society, through non-procreation, atomization, and surrender to a new and savage paganism, may despair of receiving any aid from cultural norms long out of fashion. Such observers may wish to repair to the very principles I have been downplaying as the only means by which we might rally the people to the

banner of moral, political, and cultural order.

I would not deny that principles of action can and must play a role in any meaningful recovery of our culture. But I would emphasize that principles come in many forms. And most formulations of American principles are too abstract, too rationalistic and divorced from concrete practice to be of any real use. To observe that all men are created equal, for example, can be taken as recognition that each of us is created in the image of God, and invested with an inherent dignity demanding that our essential nature be respected. But if that essential nature is seen in abstract, rationalistic terms, as that of individual, autonomous maker of choices, the principle itself will prove highly destructive of social order. Only if the cultural weight of human equality is recognized and respected can such a principle serve good ends. That is, only within a broader culture recognizing the social and religious character of our being can the principle of human equality be an abstraction from reality, rather than a perversion of it. Only if read and put into practice in accordance with our fundamental traditions can principles help re-establish the coherence of our culture.

Even here principles are not enough; they must be made real through historically appropriate and coherent practice. In criticizing the French Revolution, Edmund Burke lamented that the French King had not sought a cure for the ills of his nation in a return to traditional forms.

⁶ “Uneasy Cousins,” in George W. Carey, ed., *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1998), 38.

Resurrection of representation through the three Estates, a system not practiced for over 150 years, nonetheless would have been rooted in French custom and provided a proper means by which the French could have re-established traditional norms, forms, and rights.⁷ Likewise, if American society is to regain its coherence, it will not be through the repetition of abstract principles, but through a return to customary practices that formerly gave life and meaning to those principles. Thus, for example, conservatives continue to espouse a return to a more localist form of politics rooted in federalism and administrative decentralization, not because they believe those who currently wield power in the states and localities hold greater than average virtue or wisdom, but because it is only at the local level that such things can again be attained. We must return to local control because it is only in this forum that we can rebuild our lives in common in a manner consistent with our story as a people.

Deeper issues remain, and continue to impede any recovery of social order. Philosophical distinctions between the “ought” and the “is”—rejection of the conviction that the order of existence is a pattern of God’s will to which we must seek to con-

form—calls the very motivation to understand our past and our current nature into question. The prevalent, blind faith in the power and goodness of an undefined “progress” subjects our inheritance to a constant, rationalistic criticism no existing institution or tradition can survive. Identification of the past with all the injustices of life and the future with all its promises, stripped of the inevitable tragedies and sins of human existence, de-legitimizes the very cultural meaning that integrates our actions and beliefs with those of our fellows even as it drives us to pursue a perfection impossible on this earth.

If we are to recover any just and humane existence in common with our fellows we must again recognize that the way one becomes an American, or anything else of value, is by conforming ourselves—our actions, our values, and our character—to a standard embodied in the already existing story. The alternative is not a nation of free individuals, but chaos; a chaos of nonsensical, aimless human atoms, waiting to be molded into a kind of coherence, though often a monstrous coherence, by an all-powerful central authority with visions of its own godhood.

Americans can reestablish cultural coherence, but only if we again recognize our social natures, our dependence on our creator, the dangers of *any* civil religion, and the constitutive nature of our story.

⁷ Burke, “Letter to a Member of the French National Assembly,” in *Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1899), IV, 51.