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# LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

## THE CASE FOR FREE TRADE

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to show that the two fundamental pillars of Western civilization, namely Christianity and Liberalism, are both based on many similar conceptions. This assessment should not lead us however to the conclusion that, in terms of ideas, the two overlap perfectly. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, between Christianity and Liberalism there is a fairly high degree of compatibility. In this article we intend to show that one of the fundamental conceptions of liberalism, that is free trade, is based on the innovative idea ushered by the Christianity in the Western world, namely the universal brotherhood of man. The advent of Christianity in Europe has brought the idea that all humans are God's sons regardless of their ethnic origins, be them Greeks or barbarians, and live in an empire united through international commerce. The Christian idea of a universal empire of people has represented the intellectual foundation of the theory of free trade, and thus an essential element of modern liberalism. Therefore, the model of the Great Society proposed by liberalism has a counterpart in the Christian conception of the universal empire of people.

*Keywords:* liberalism, Christianity, great society, free trade, emporium

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### 1. Introduction

Western civilization has emerged and developed around fundamental ideas, which have been widespread and accepted by a growing number of individuals throughout the course of time. Its origins can be traced back to the difficult process of transition from the model of closed autarchic society, specific to the Old World, to the Great Society, also known as the Open Society, an essential feature of the New World. This process occurs simultaneously under the growing influence of Christian conceptions and of the ideas of a new system of principles named liberalism. In his fundamental work, *Republic*, Plato captures the transition from the social order founded on concepts from the autarchical world to the cosmopolitan social order in the form of the war between Sparta and Athens [1]. This 'clash of civilizations', that went in the favour of this new type of cosmopolitan society, specific to the Western World, has been triggered by the emergence of the new ideas brought by Christian

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thinking. However, the slow and tortuous appearance of civilization in the Western world, a process that begun two and a half millennia ago in the Mediterranean World, has taken place through the widening spread of socio-political concepts gradually articulated against the background of a new socio-political conception, that is liberalism, and materialized by policies of a similar type. However, the modern conception of the world represented by liberalism originated in the moral and ethical conceptions of Christianity. One of the most important innovations of liberalism and Christianity refers to the type of social order in which people should live: the Great Society.

## 2. Closed society, anti-liberal and pre-Christian

For most of history, people have lived in closed, autarchic societies. The manifestations of such a social order were the small groups, bands or tribes. The emergence of Jericho, the first city in the history of humankind, was the first step towards a new kind of society - the open society - but its actual occurrence has necessitated the passing of thousands of years. Therefore, people have lived for thousands of years in small communities, on relatively small territories. These archaic forms of social organization were rigid, heavily layered, and led by military chiefs who inherited the political management rights from their ancestors. The small size of these communities allowed the setting of common objectives and *in corpore* actions towards their achievement. In this type of social order, the most important aspect was the community as a whole, not the individual. The individual was seen as a constituent of the mechanism functioning as an entity. Man devoted his efforts to achieve common goals, few in number and relatively easy to formulate. Broadly speaking, the small social order was guided by principles that we today classify as belonging to communism, despite its rigid social stratification and its hereditary nature of the political management.

The small social order was an autarchical one. One of its guiding ideas was that population growth, by birth and especially by accepting outsiders, led to its own dissolution. This bias, still widespread in the modern world and manifested through the Malthusian fear of overpopulation, generated a public policy that implied a severe control of external relations. In almost all pre-Christian cultures, the stranger was the embodiment of the evil. In many tribes, people believed that a stranger was dwelt by an evil spirit that could be transferred to the native through direct contact. Obviously, some closed communities practiced *philoxeny*. For example, *xenos* was a recognized institution in ancient Greece, but, in principle, the prevailing attitude of the ancient world was the reluctance towards strangers. If social relations within the tribe were dominated by some kind of brotherhood, the intertribal relations were dominated by conflict, xenophobia and antagonism. To avoid bloodshed, the members of different communities preferred to live in the enclosed space of one's own tribe or gang. These archaic conceptions have led to the outline of an unsustainable and rudimentary foreign trade theory which, despite its

inconsistency and the passage of time, was to be characterized a few centuries later as the foreign trade having a null sum game. According to this theory, the trade between the two communities does not generate any surplus to the world as a whole. In other words, the trade with foreign countries was considered sterile at a global economic level, since the gain of a nation was based on the loss of the other nation.

Therefore, the main conceptions of the closed society on the foreign relations support the following: foreign exchanges are useless. They can bring about benefits only if one is in a position of strength. A tribe can change goods with other tribes only if it has sufficient power to adjudicate the benefits and to impose losses on his partner. Otherwise, the foreign trade has no use and it is illogical. This primitive conception of foreign exchange is derived from the archaic concepts specific to the closed society, which is anti-liberal in essence. Social confinement, trade protectionism, xenophobia and belligerent attitude are consequences of these primitive conceptions on the world.

As we have seen, in the period prior to Christianity, the dominant constructs about the social organization were those of a closed society, consisting of a relatively small number of fellows. For example, the ideal of social organization outlined by Plato in two of his books, namely *The Republic* and *The Laws*, was envisaged a social whole composed by a small number of people and which was based on the naturally moral inequality, where people were born as either masters or slaves. Secondly, the social whole had precedence over the individual, who was considered as a simple constituent of a social order which was primitive, autarchical and completely separated from the rest of the world. In other words, in the closed society, typical to the Old World, and the main model of social order until the Peloponnesian War, there were two types of inequalities. The first promulgated the slave as inferior to his master, being a mere 'dumb tool', and the second type of inequality acknowledged the stranger as inferior to the inhabitants of a certain city, being thus considered a pagan, a barbarian, an enemy. The reason of the undeniable separation between members of different cities was their faith in different gods. A mix of cities and of their members would have generated 'a mix of morals', which would have led to a decadent social order and, ultimately, to its extinction. Consequently, between the Athenians and the Spartans there was, once again, an antagonistic relationship. In order to avoid open conflict, the individuals of these cities had to live separately and the links between them had to be cut. All these conceptions that guided the Old World have been reproduced by the most influential philosopher of humanity, Plato, in the books already mentioned [1, 2]. When building the model of the perfect city, the author of *the Republic* did not invent a different kind of social order but broadly reproduced the dominant conceptions that guided mankind since ancient times.

### **3. Emergence of the Great Society: Christianity and Liberalism**

The most important event of the history, that is the transition from an autarchical social order to an open society [3], was produced under the influence of Christian thought and of the founders of the old liberalism. The major change made by Christianity consisted in a completely new vision on the world. From the point of view of Christianity, the Greek - barbarian separation is unnatural, because the world itself is a universal city where all the residents are children of the same God. This vision shared by Christianity and the parents of liberalism, the Stoics, removes any moral inequality between the residents of the universal city. The world is an open space and not just a bunch of autarchic cities, the Greek has the same status as the barbarian. In addition, the slave and master are equal before God. The Spartan is no longer the enemy of the Athenian, Greeks no longer have an antagonistic relationship with the barbarians, there are no *believers* and no pagans, because all people are sons treated equally by the same on only Father. The idea of the empire, very influential in the field of political thought in ancient Greece and ancient Rome, has a correspondent in the Christian conception as well: people living in a Universal Empire - the Church - as sons of God. Although they are different, they are brothers even though they come from different cities. The idea of universal brotherhood of individuals is an innovative idea that allowed the birth of a modern world, completely different from the one based on the ideas of closed society. It has counterpart in the liberal conception of the Great Society, outlined by Adam Smith and embraced by the most important representatives of liberalism - F. Hayek, L. von Mises - or of the Open Society, developed by K. Popper.

The political and social model proposed by liberalism does not differentiate between individuals. They have skills, qualities and different assets, but are equal before the law, just as the Christians are equal before God. Christianity and liberalism reject natural moral differences proper to the Old World. Despite speaking different languages and living in separate territories, the Greek and the Englishman are individuals belonging to the same Great Society. Moral equality of individuals brought by Christianity made the separation master- slave, which was sacred for the political thought in ancient Greece, to be replaced with a modern vision, according to which a person cannot be another one's tool. Trying to synthesize the new vision of the Stoics on freedom in ancient Greece, Lord Acton, politician, historian and writer with strong Christian beliefs, writes: "Before God there is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither rich nor poor, and slave is as good as his master, because people are free from birth, all are citizens of that universal polis comprising world, brothers of one family and the sons of God" [4]. Strictly speaking, this Universal Empire must be a Christian one, and the brotherhood of individuals must be seen as a brotherhood in Christ. From the liberal point of view, these fundamental ideas of Christianity are extremely important because, beyond theological nuances, the idea of universal brotherhood of men represents the

main pillar of liberal social order, based on cooperation and mutual benefit and not on divergent interests.

Inspired by the fundamental ideas of Christianity, the liberal thinkers believe that every human being is a distinct entity with inalienable rights over their own person. Therefore, people are morally equal, have a minimum property, which prevents them from being slaves. The individual is sovereign over his body and mind. He is not a tool for anyone, but a person free to think and to act as he wishes as long as he does not attack other individuals' properties and freedom. Under the influence of the Christian idea of equality before God, the Western world has gradually wiped the allegedly innate moral inequality between individuals, which has thus allowed each individual to be considered a free person. The individual ceases to be a mere tool, becoming the final purpose of his own actions. The civilized world that has emerged in the West was and is based on these fundamental values promoted by Christianity and liberalism: moral equality of individuals (which allowed the emergence of the concept of equality before the law), private property and personal freedom. The abolition of slavery, the gradual reduction of the coercive power of the state, the warranty of the rights by constitutional arrangements, the freedom of movement of goods and people, the emergence of the free market are the logical consequence and developed by the system of liberal principles.

The spread of the Christian conception of moral equality among individuals has had extremely important effects on the ideas that have guided Western world and the policies implemented within it. The disappearance of old theories, according to which some people are born with a moral ascendancy on others, has allowed the birth of the idea of autonomous individual in dealing with other individuals. Or, an autonomous individual has ownership over his own body and over the results of his labour. Based on the principle of private property, he has the right to travel and trade freely his legitimately acquired goods, that is by respecting the others' properties and freedom.

#### **4. Universal brotherhood of individuals and free trade - theological foundations**

The Western world has abandoned primitivism and become civilized because it allowed itself to be guided by the main values promoted by liberalism: the recognition of the individual as an autonomous being with inalienable rights, the equality before the law, the observance and the guarantee of private property, personal freedom and free enterprise. For this reason liberalism is "the essence of Western civilization" [5]. However, contrary to intellectuals' widespread belief, the liberal thinking foundations are not to be found in the economic theories formulated in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century by Adam Smith, David Ricardo and J.B. Say, but in the modern conceptions enounced by Christianity two millennia earlier. In fact, the liberal economic theories that have inspired the policies promoted by Western countries after the eighteenth century, which, in their turn, allowed the

extraordinary development of the western world, were originally founded on the innovative conceptions of Christian thought.

Since its inception, Christianity has seen the world as a universal space where individuals live peacefully because they are sons of God. The Church, the theological equivalent of the political idea of the Empire, considered that every human being is a Christian, not a Greek, Roman or barbarian. This universal city includes individuals in a space of brotherhood and peace. Thus, the liberal economic theories promoted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tried to find a practical justification of theological issues raised by Christianity [6].

Two millennia ago, Christian thinkers believed that uniting different people in a universal city, characterized by brotherhood and ‘perpetual peace’ [7] as sons of God, may become effective through trade. They considered the activity of trade as a way to promote the universal brotherhood of individuals. As it is well known, all closed society advocates, led by Plato, were fierce opponents of trade between different cities. The free movement of goods and people between the various regions of the world was seen as a means of moral decadence because the contact with foreigners was leading to the alteration of indigenous beliefs. The contempt for foreign trade, but not for the internal one as well, was based on the so called threat on indigenous beliefs and morals which circulated along with traders and their goods. As we have previously mentioned, the parochial mentality of the closed society generated a first theory of foreign trade, which showed that this was a zero sum game, where one partner won at the other's expense. Therefore, the foreign trade involves force, domination and antagonistic relationships.

In the Empire of the Christian Church, a universal brotherhood prevails. People are no longer categorized as Christians or pagans. Being all God's sons, the relations between them have to be fraternal. To make them behave as brothers, God created the trade. These essential ideas of Christianity have led to the theory of free trade, a theory formulated by the parents of modern liberalism and of classical economics. The idea that Providence united individuals in an empire of universal brotherhood through trade was clearly stated in the fourth century AD, although it stemmed earlier and it was already existent [8]. The Christian thinkers believe that God wants people to meet in an universal and open space of the Christian Church in such a way that their relationships are not belligerent, but based on brotherly peaceful cooperation. To make this happen, Providence used the originally differential allocation of resources, so that different areas of the world be equipped with different resources.

In the fourth century, Libanius of Antioch clearly stated this old idea of Christianity: “God did not bestow all products upon all parts of the earth, but distributed His gifts over different regions, to the end that men might cultivate a social relationship because one would have need of the help of another, and so He called commerce into being, that all men might be able to have common enjoyment of the fruits of the earth, no matter where produced” [9]. Obviously, Libanius was a pagan, or, in the era of paganism, “people’s attitude, particularly that of the Greeks and Romans, was hostile to trade”. Despite this fact, he states

an idea that will have an important influence on two of his disciples, namely Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom.

In 354 AD, Libanius of Antioch founded a famous school of thought, which will have a strong influence on the social, economic and political way of thinking in the fourth century's Eastern Roman Empire. Despite the fact that he was not an open supporter of Christian ideas, his course of thought exerted a major influence on two of the fathers of the Christian Church, Saint Basil the Great and Saint John Chrysostom.

In order to improve his own education, Saint Basil travelled extensively, arriving, *inter alia*, to the school of Libanius of Antioch. His outstanding intellectual abilities enabled him to exert a significant influence upon the political leaders of the Roman Empire, on the Christian theology and upon the population in general. Therefore, his views influenced both Christians and pagans, inhabitants of Roman Empire and foreign people alike. Therefore, some of Libanius' ideas, among which the one referring to trade is included, have become widespread in the intellectual environment from almost the entire Europe. Thus, Saint Ambrose, one of the four Fathers of the Western Church, conveys the influence that the concepts of Saint Basil the Great had upon him when he stated that: "The sea is good ... as a carrier of merchandise thereby linking distant people together. Furthermore, the sea defends us from the perils of warfare, by the sea, the fury of barbarian is hedged in." [10]

Saint John Chrysostom had direct contact with the ideas expressed by Libanius, as he was born right in Antioch, a settlement that, at that time, belonged to Syria. His exceptional intellectual qualities enabled him to become one of the most important figures of the Christian world, occupying the position of Archbishop of Constantinople, being recognized as a saint by both the Eastern Church and the Western Church. In this way, his conceptions came to influence the world of ideas across Europe. As a result, the ideas of international trade originating from Libanius are introduced *via* Saint John Chrysostom to Netherlands, the first country in the world to adopt and widely practice free trade.

One of Saint John Chrysostom's most important followers was Hugo Grotius, jurist, theologian, apologist of Christianity, and one of the founders of international law, along with Francisco de Victoria, a theologian, jurist and founder of the School of Salamanca, and Alberico Gentili, professor of Civil law at Oxford University, an Italian with strong protestant beliefs. Grotius, considered by many as one of the fathers of modern liberalism, was very concerned with the problem of foreign trade, but his arguments were built on theological grounds. His legal and economic theories were one of the most convincing pleas in favour of free trade among nations. Therefore, the liberal theory of international trade was founded on the conceptions of the Fathers of the Christian Church, widespread and accepted in the modern era by the Dutch school of thinking represented especially by Hugo Grotius. In an attempt to justify trade liberalization, Grotius quotes from Saint John Chrysostom, *Orationes III*: "... That the Length of the Way might not deter us from the

mutual Converse, God has Given us a shorter Road, the Sea, Which lies near every Country, That the whole world being Considered as one House, May we frequently visit one Another, and mutually and easily communicated [i.e. exchange] what each Country affords peculiar to Itself, That each man who inhabits it a small Portion of the Earth enjoys whatever is Produced Elsewhere, as Freely as if He Were Master of the Whole” [11]. This idea of Saint John Chrysostom has found its counterpart in the views of the School of Antioch, led by Libanius. Libanius and Saint John Chrysostom developed their conceptions starting from the idea of the universal empire of people, united under one roof and stimulated by God to cooperate freely by a differentiated distribution of the resources on Earth. The same approach was developed by Theodoret, born in Antioch, proponent of this school of thought, Archbishop of Cyrus, a disciple of Saint John Chrysostom, and one of the most influential theologians of the Eastern Church despite the fact that his writings against Saint Cyril were condemned. He emphasized the divine origins of international trade, arguing that the world should be a big free market through which people from different areas of the Earth can cooperate. In *Providence*, he states: “For the Creator, wishing to instil harmony into Human Beings, made them depend on one another for various reasons. For this reason we make long voyages on sea, seek our needs from others, and bring back cargoes of what we want; nor has Providence allocated to each section of the earth all the needs of mankind lest self-sufficiency should militate against friendship. Accordingly the sea lies in the centre of the Earth, divided into countless bays like a market place of a huge city, providing abundance of every necessity, and receives Many sellers and buyers and brings Them from One Place to Another and back again.” [12]

Starting from these very solid conceptions, Grotius proposed a theory of international law based on the ‘sacred right’ (*ius sanctissimum*) of people to travel freely and exchange goods with no hindrance, a right which has its origin in the will of God. Thus, the free movement of individuals and of goods is based on a natural law and cannot be restricted by any temporal authority. In his work *De Indis*, he strongly expressed the idea that no nation can restrict an individual’s right to free trade because it derives from “the essential natural law of self-defence and self-preservation”, the war being a legitimate means to protect this right [13]. In fact, defending the right to free trade is one of the few reasons of the war. Cooperation, not conflict, is the natural state of mankind. Grotius makes the clearest statement of the principles of free trade in his *Mare Liberum*, written in 1609. From his point of view, the most obvious principle which must govern relations between different parts of the world is the freedom of movement of goods and people. The individuals’ natural right to practice free trade is one of the fundamental principles that must guide international law, whereas equality, mutual gain and individual responsibility are the criteria after which the transactions between partners from different countries should be carried out.



Grotius' theological, legal and economic conceptions were a huge step in the development of the liberal theories of international trade. However, his ideas were not entirely original. At the end of the eighteenth century, Spain had one of the most powerful merchant fleets of the world. In addition, the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus opened a new era in international relations. Thus, the foreign trade had become a major interest for the intellectual world in the Iberian Peninsula, especially for the School of Salamanca, founded by Portuguese and Spanish scholars on the foundation provided by Catholicism. Jesuits and Dominicans thinkers formulated an innovative legal doctrine, considering individual freedom as a fundamental principle that should govern relations between people. Thus, every human being has the inherent right to life, dignity, property and free speech. Under the influence exerted by Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic thinkers of Salamanca School strongly advocated that not only the principle of universal brotherhood, but its derivatives as well should be applied to individuals from all over the world. This cosmopolitan conception was resuming the old Christian idea of the universal empire of people, a conception that Europeans were not willing to apply to the territories discovered after 1492. However, the conception of moral equality among individuals from all over the world was the moral and ethical foundation of the vision of the School of Salamanca on foreign relations. Starting from the principle that human relationships must rely on observing the natural right to personal freedom, the founder of this school of thought, Francisco de Victoria, formulated a theory of international relations based on the inalienable rights of every person. In short, everyone in the world should be treated equally, by virtue of their status as human beings. Or, if the Spaniards regulate their relations on the premise that everyone has the right to life, dignity, property and freedom, the same must become effective in their international relations. Therefore, the international relations should be based on the natural rights of each person [14].

This liberal vision of international relations was taken up and developed, a century later, by the man who sketched, on a theological basis, the economic theory of free trade, Hugo Grotius. The influence of the famous Dutch jurist and theologian in the intellectual world was outstanding. In the seventeenth century, his ideas were taken and shaped by Samuel Pufendorf and, especially by the thinker who had the greatest merit in the foundation of modern liberalism, John Locke. Translated into the political frame, Grotius' influence can be discovered in Locke's idea of the moral equality of individuals before the Creator, who endowed them with inalienable rights. The preamble of the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776), considered one of the important results of the influence exerted by the system of liberal principles, states that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". In economic theory, Grotius' view of international trade will be found in the theory of free trade created by the English classical school of economics, essentially liberal, in the second half of the eighteenth century. Using the ethical and moral conceptions offered by one of the most

important ideas of Christianity - the universal brotherhood of individuals – the Dutch writer created the theological basis of a fundamental idea of modern liberalism, the notion of the Great Society, a world of cooperation, of eternal peace [14], of private property, respect for human dignity and personal freedom .

## **5. Conclusions**

From a philosophical, moral and ethical point of view, the Western civilization is based on a conceptual system provided by Christianity and liberalism. These two systems of principles have developed simultaneously and have been adopted by the entire Western world throughout time. Both offered a conception completely different from the ideas that guided the autarchical, primitive societies. The great innovation brought by Christianity was the idea of a universal empire of people, where all individuals are sons of God, a conception which must be understood as a fraternal charity promoted through God's fatherhood, Christ's divine sonship, and brotherhood in Christ. The universal brotherhood of individuals was the cornerstone of a new vision on society, an open society, composed of individuals morally equal. This innovative approach of Christian doctrine helped liberalism to outline a new type of social order, composed of free individuals sovereign over their own body and mind, endowed by the Creator with the inalienable right to life, property and the pursuit of personal happiness. Starting from the premise of universal brotherhood of men, the Christianity founded the liberal idea of the Great Society, formulated by Adam Smith in the second half of the eighteenth century and admirably developed by intellectuals such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Karl Popper.

Obviously, Christian thinkers such as Hugo Grotius and the Jesuits and Dominicans of Salamanca Catholic School offered a theological explanation of the Great Society, an essentially liberal conception formulated, however, by the liberal intellectuals of the English School of classical economics. Liberalism has taken the Christian conceptions synthesized by Grotius' 'economic theology' and strengthened them by means of justification related in particular to economic theory. From a philosophical point of view, the entire system of liberal principles is based on two essential ideas of Christianity, namely the universal empire of people and the moral equality of individuals before their Creator. The gradual acceptance of these ideas has triggered the collapse of closed anti-liberal society and the emergence of a new kind of social order, the Great Society, based on individual freedom, private property and equality before the law. These three principles of liberal social order allowed the demolition of the high walls of tribal life and cementing of the Great Society, coagulated particularly through free trade. From this point of view, the great merit of liberalism has been that of establishing a connection between the theological explanations of Christianity and the economic theory.

The connection between Christianity and liberalism described in this article should not be generalized. Undoubtedly, the social doctrine of Christianity supports the idea of a Great Society, where people freely exchange goods and services. However, great Christian theologians do not accept the liberalization of international trade. For example, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin were extremely reluctant and sceptical towards the virtues of free trade. Given this, their visions have rather approached those of Aristotelian political philosophy and ethics. Aristotle, the disciple of the greatest enemy of the open society - Plato, had, however, a different conception from that of his master. His vision was rather cosmopolitan and his attitude towards individual freedom and private property easily turned away from the outline of his spiritual mentor. However, Aristotle did not understand the deep logic of the foreign trade, of the property, and thus of the individual liberty. Under the influence of Aristotelian conceptual system, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Calvin failed to understand all the mundane consequences of the Christian idea of universal brotherhood of individuals. But what really matters is that Christianity provided a new conception of the world, shaped and improved by liberal thought, and, when put into practice, allowed the creation of Western civilization.

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