

Part 19: Book 4, Chs. 8 & 9

Book 4, Ch. 8: Civil Religion

Early States were entirely based on religious principles. “[N]o kings save the gods, and no government save theocracy.”

Only if you restrict to totalitarian States. There were plenty of small rulers who enjoyed limited but significant powers.

It’s also worth noting that, unless the ancient pagan gods actually were giving instructions to their priest-equivalents, there were rulers, they just pretended to be getting orders from somewhere else, which is exactly equivalent to Rousseau’s prince getting orders from the Sovereign in most cases.

Each distinct people had their own god or set of gods, and this led to war between peoples and “theological and civil intolerance, which, as we shall see hereafter, are by nature the same.”

Spoiler alert: It’s not that they’re by nature the same, it’s that Rousseau’s insistence on a totalitarian framework forces them to be identical, or else the State might have to share some of its power with other institutions.

Greeks commonly claimed to rediscover their gods among barbarians to justify their rulership of those barbarians. But this was confusion and/or convenient.

Seems closer to the latter. But the classification of various mythical beings as “different” seems to be an exercise in being arbitrary. How could one prove that two entities believed to be gods are different, and not the same entity being seen through various lenses, at different times? It would be like trying to come up with an alibi... “No, your honor, I can say definitively that *my* god never turned into a bull in order to seduce a woman.”

Pagan gods were not covetous or expansionary and boundaries between religions/nations were generally respected. Jephthah of the ancient Jews implied that the Ammonites’ god Chamos had rights of similar nature to that of his own god.

Pagan gods were covetous and expansionary when they could get away with it. Groups would temporize and recognize the rights of groups they couldn’t conquer and didn’t want to inflame.

However, when the Jews were conquered, they refused to give up their god, which their conquerors saw as rebellion, and resulted in their persecution.

As long as gods and governments were inextricably linked, “there was no way of converting a people except by enslaving it, and there could be no missionaries save conquerors.”

All religions are more or less evangelical. Rousseau is drastically oversimplifying a vast chunk of human history in a way that I think discards real nuance.

“So far from men fighting for the gods, the gods, as in Homer, fought for men; each asked his god for victory, and repayed him with new altars. The Romans, before taking a city, summoned its gods to quit it; and, in leaving the Tarentines their outraged gods, they regarded them as subject

to their own and compelled to do them homage. They left the vanquished their gods as they left them their laws. A wreath to the Jupiter of the Capitol was often the only tribute they imposed.”

I think this is white-washing the Roman empire to a mind-boggling degree, and ignoring a variety of soft and hard powers that the empire used to grow and maintain its holdings. It's hard to prove a negative, of course, and maybe there were a number of small tribes that weren't able to provide much in tribute, but they were certainly expected to stay conquered and not obstruct any further conquests.

The Roman cult spread with the empire, and by adding gods to the pantheon, eventually all recognized the same gods, and paganism was unified.

Paganism was unified over the Roman empire. Yet the word “paganism” also includes other religious systems which were never part of the Roman empire, too. Rousseau is over-simplifying again, because it moves the argument in the direction he wants it to go.

Christianity attempted to separate religion from the State, which created “internal divisions which have never ceased to trouble Christian peoples.” Pagans feared Christians as “rebels... feigning to submit.”

Different sects of Christianity have attempted this to different degrees, from having a monarch head the church to a wall of separation.

Later on, Christians actually got power and “soon this so-called kingdom of the other world turned, under a visible leader, into the most violent of earthly despotisms.”

Again, probably a bit overstated for rhetorical purposes. There were some pretty bad non-Christian despotisms in history.

Jurisdictional conflict between State and religious leaders makes “good polity impossible in Christian States.” Which should a man obey, his government or his priest?

And as long as Rousseau clings to a totalitarian framework, he cannot permit this conflict. However, if you either create a genuinely limited government (if possible) or establish government based entirely on voluntary contracts, the conflict vanishes. Even a temporarily limited government can make this work for a time.

Various groups tried to bring back the old system (unification of religion and State), but all eventually failed. The King of England is the head of the church, and so are the Czars, but they are more ministers than masters. They cannot change the system, but only maintain it more or less effectively.

The idea that the Kings of England and Czars of Russia had no effect whatsoever on their countries' religious doctrines is an amazing stretch. I feel like there's an example somewhere in the conduct of Henry VIII...

“Wherever the clergy is a corporate body, it is master and legislator in its own country.” Such States have “two powers, [and] two Sovereigns.”

Or no Sovereigns, since they don't actually exist...

It's also worth noting that the clergy is not a legitimate "Sovereign" either, since it excludes most people. They are "forced, but not bound, to obey" (Book 3, Ch. 10).

"Hobbes alone has seen the evil and how to remedy it, and has dared to propose the reunion of the two heads of the eagle... But he should have seen that the masterful spirit of Christianity is incompatible with his system, and that the priestly interest would always be stronger than that of the State."

The priestly interest is frequently *not* stronger than that of the State. But the problem with a Leviathan is that no man is bound to obey an authority he has not freely agreed to. To admit ideas like "implied consent" and so on is an invitation to slavery. It leaves mankind back at "might makes right," which also implies that any man, no matter how humble of station, is perfectly morally justified in attempting whatever violence he can accomplish onto State enforcers and executives. This is not a stable system.

Christianity is neither irrelevant to the body politic, nor a support. "[N]o State has ever been founded without a religious basis... [and] the law of Christianity at bottom does more harm by weakening than good by strengthening the constitution of the State."

Using an expansive definition of "religion," Rousseau is kind of right here, but his earlier statements that the form of government depends on the people, etc. (Book 3, Ch. 8) mean that he can't just declare this, he has to argue why it couldn't become true in the future.

But we recall that Rousseau is also hostile to innovation, assuming that the citizens of a republic should generally remain relatively poor and undifferentiated. (Book 2, Ch. 10 and beyond)

Three types of religion: 1) Internal religion of man, 2) External religion of country, and 3) Religion that "gives men two codes of legislation, two rulers, and two countries."

3) makes it impossible for citizens to be faithful to both State and religion. Lamas, Japanese, Roman Christianity. This type is "so clearly bad, that it is waste of time to stop to prove it such. All that destroys social unity is worthless; all institutions that set man in contradiction to himself are worthless."

Bad from the perspective of enacting a totalitarian State. Maybe not so bad if that's not one of your assumptions. It's also worth noting that these systems thrived for hundreds of years, underwent various conquests, expansions, contractions, etc. There is still a Dalai Lama today.

If nothing else is to convince us that Rousseau is judging based on an overly restrictive assumption, it should be this fact.

2) unites divinity with "love of the laws, making country the object of the citizens' adoration, teaches them that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god." Only government functionaries are religious figures. However, it also is "founded on lies and error." It creates superstition and can be "tyrannous and exclusive, and makes a people bloodthirsty and intolerant." It forces its people into a state of war with the rest of the world, and thus endangers the longevity of the State.

Rousseau doesn't often distance himself from Plato but this is one of those times. For the sake of argument, it's worth noting, hypothetically assuming there is some god, that one nation somewhere

might actually be entitled to this position, and Rousseau has no way of determining whether that is true or not of any given country.

1) tells men they are all brothers, and doesn't affect the body politic. However, it also makes laws only as powerful as the force behind them.

Unless the people agree voluntarily to the laws in some form...

Discourse on "true Christians:" people would be good and dutiful, but focused on the next world, not this one. No unity, no martial spirit. Easily twisted by one untrue man gathering power, and too willing to suffer in this world under an abusive prince. Soldiers would be "beaten, crushed, and destroyed" since they have no attachment to this world.

Rousseau looks at the "ideal Christian" as if such a thing is already pre-determined and no possible counter-argument is possible. Some members of every sect of Christianity believe themselves to be the "true" ones, and all have different ideas and applications of what they believe to be the word of god.

Furthermore, Rousseau is examining some kind of idealized follower of some idealized Christianity, which might not even exist in any meaningful numbers, but is also another case of him abstracting far away from "man as he really is."

Christian troops were powerful under pagan leaders, emulating good pagan soldiers, but not under Christian emperors. Crusaders were soldiers of the priesthood, not soldiers of the State.

But the priests weren't pagans, right? Hard to see exactly what Rousseau's point here is, other than that strong belief in an afterlife might make a person cling less tenaciously to this one, which is a tenuous over-generalization at best.

Footnote 1: (Leadup) "The right which the social compact gives the Sovereign over the subjects does not, we have seen, exceed the limits of public expediency." (Footnote, attributed to Marquis d'Argenson) "In the republic, each man is perfectly free in what does not harm others." (Rousseau himself) "This is the invariable limitation, which it is impossible to define more exactly."

Rousseau does this sometimes. He pays a little lip-service to the idea that his framework permits all acts that aren't torts. But always remember his statement from earlier: "Each man alienates, I admit, by the social compact, only such part of his powers, goods and liberty as it is important for the community to control; but it must also be granted that the Sovereign is sole judge of what is important." (Book 2, Ch. 4)

Sovereign needs to create religious-style rules that determine what makes "a good citizen or a faithful subject." State should banish those who do not believe or follow these rules. Such people are "anti-social." If someone publicly recognizes the rules and later acts against them, death for "lying before the law."

This sounds suspiciously like Plato's scheme with a coat of paint over it...

Dogmas should be "few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary." Suggested rules are the "existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of

foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas. Its negative dogmas I confine to one, intolerance, which is a part of the cults we have rejected.”

Yet these dogmas were not mentioned in Rousseau’s earlier chapter on the separations of the law (Book 2, Ch. 12). So these doctrines are law, or not? And why weren’t they mentioned earlier. They place very powerful bindings on the people, and punish them in ways they probably didn’t expect if/when they joined the social contract.

“It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned; to love them would be to hate God who punishes them: we positively must either reclaim or torment them.”

Again, different sects have different levels of evangelism. Rousseau is just plain wrong here, because someone can make a moral judgment without justifying aggression against the sinner. Moreover, certain doctrines don’t connect salvation to morality directly. Rousseau is an unimaginative mess here.

Theological intolerance inevitably leads to civil effects and subjugates the prince to the priests.

Which would be fine if the State was voluntary or limited.

Also worth noting that he’s just stripped freedom of conscience from the citizens, finally.

Tolerance to all tolerant religions, as long as dogmas do not contradict “duties of citizenship.”

Two hundred years before Herbert Marcuse (I think?) would try to pull the same silliness.

Basically, Rousseau is demanding that all proper religions subjugate themselves to the State. Remember how he said Christians were too worried about the next life? Now he’s saying the State should control how the people perceive/understand/believe the next life works.

This is a level of totalitarianism that even I didn’t anticipate.

“But whoever dares to say: Outside the Church is no salvation, ought to be driven from the State, unless the State is the Church, and the prince the pontiff.”

Different religions should be nice to each other! And the State! *Especially* the State! Or else!

Book 4, Ch. 9: Conclusion

“Now that I have laid down the true principles of political right, and tried to give the State a basis of its own to rest on, I ought next to strengthen it by its external relations, which would include the law of nations, commerce, the right of war and conquest, public right, leagues, negotiations, treaties, etc. But all this forms a new subject that is far too vast for my narrow scope. I ought throughout to have kept to a more limited sphere.”

Typical way to end something like this: “Of course all this can be applied to all these other spheres of activity, but I’m not going to say how.”

I think we’ve let him tie himself into enough knots already.

My Conclusions and Summary

Rousseau's framework is hopelessly totalitarian. The State is encouraged to impoverish everyone and maintain them at roughly subsistence levels. This creates beleaguered permanent minorities that have a beef with the State but no way to ever free themselves from its grip.

There is no examination of incentives and very little of possible downsides. Typically Rousseau gives us a "should" or an "ought" but nothing in the system encourages it to move in the directions he prefers.

No part of his system is vulnerable to objective measurement to determine whether it's working or not. Everything is based on fictitious constructs that a tyrannical government can use to justify its exploitation of the people.

He relies on some hypothetical Legislator or Legislators to write the laws, and the people to ratify them, but there's no guarantee that this weird angelic character will be found, and no way to distinguish a bad Legislator from a good but popular vote.

Rousseau vacillates between saying that the State should be upheld as long as possible, and various statements giving extremely low bars for dissolving the State. This is fundamentally confused and serves to encourage governments to pretend harder, rather than actually act properly. It also creates plenty of opportunities for splinter groups, whether with good or bad intentions, to either try to topple or gain control of the State apparatus. The whole thing is so confused that it might end up more violent than a plain, pure tyranny.

Even if it were clear, the first thing a Rousseauian State does is ensure the people are far too weak to defend themselves against its edicts. Which means lots of innocent people lose their lives because they believe they are being "forced, not bound, to obey."

The book is full of logical contradictions (tyrant/despot distinction: Book 3, Ch. 10; indivisibility of the Sovereign: Book 2, Ch. 2, contradicted later many times), bleating assurances that he's not contradicting himself, sloppy language, misused/re-used terms, and bizarre definitions.

Rousseau says repeatedly that the form of government depends on the people, then spends chapters and chapters idolizing Rome without making it clear which lessons he thinks are worth learning from Rome. He talks about proper government types using a single axis: population, and ignoring all others.

He is allergic to any kind of check and balance, which further cements the worst incentives into his system.

He uses language from the Classical Liberals, whose intent, however flawed, was to step away from "might makes right," and takes those terms and twists them into the most horrible totalitarian nightmare you can imagine.

All of the failings of the Classical Liberals are turned up to 11, and every possible failure of a Classical Liberal State is practically guaranteed to happen immediately.

It's incredibly dangerous because his use of Classical Liberal language blurs the line between a large limited State and an unlimited one. Rousseau's framework creates not merely a wolf in sheep's clothing, like the Fabian Socialists, it's more like a *Grendel* in sheep's clothing.

In the last significant chapter, he strips *freedom of conscience* from the citizens, leaving them with literally nothing but the right to vote and be counted, when the government decides he may.

What it basically teaches is a way for a limited State (in principle, if possible) to change itself into an unlimited one without telling anybody.

Raico quote from *The Struggle for Liberty*: "Does Rousseau say he's going to strike off the chains? No. He says, 'How can that be made legitimate?' Do you follow what I'm saying? Scholars don't seem to be able to get what Rousseau's talking about here. He's talking now about how to legitimate the enslaved condition, or relatively enslaved condition, of human beings in society."