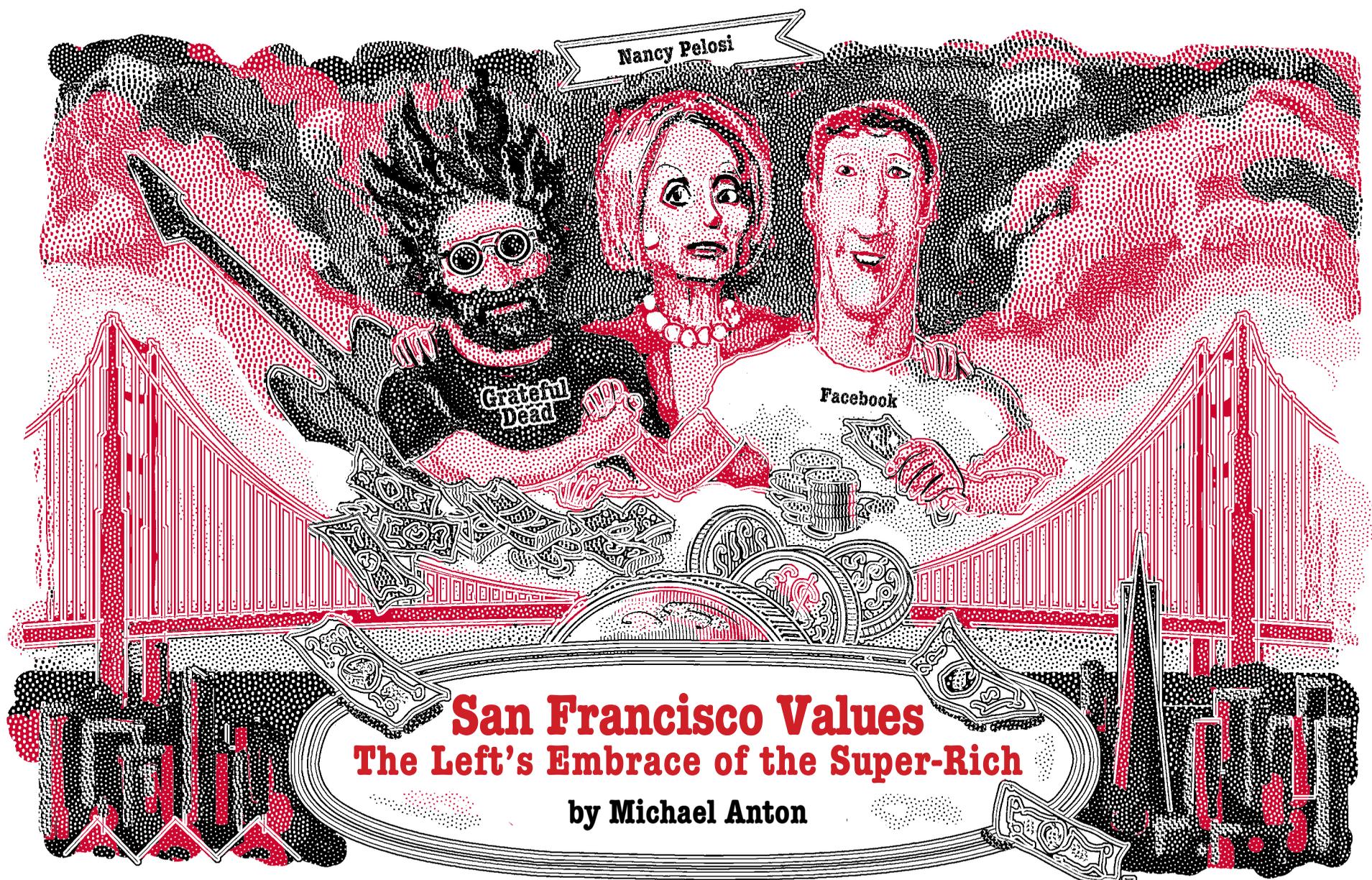


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 4, FALL 2015

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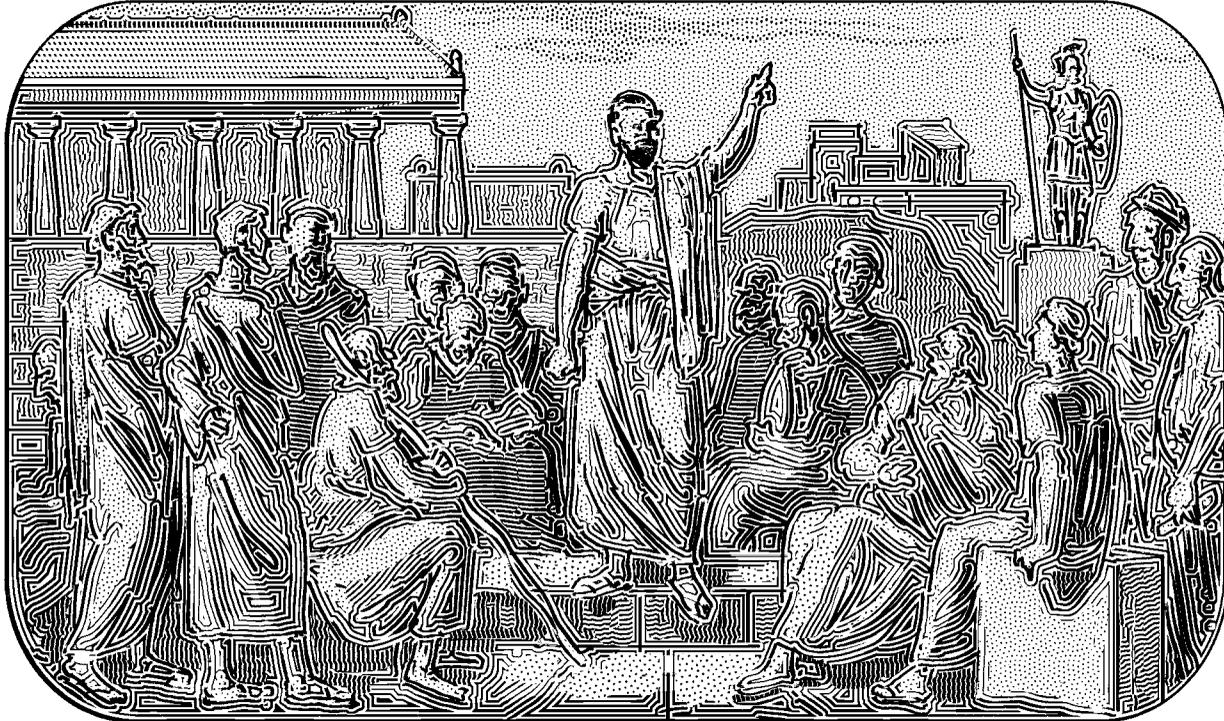
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## SECULARISM'S CHRISTIAN ROOTS

*Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, by Larry Siedentop.  
Belknap Press, 448 pages, \$35



*Paul Preaching in Athens; drawing after an old print*

**I**NVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL ADVANCES and adroitly defends the provocative thesis that “[s]ecularism is Christianity’s gift to the world.” Larry Siedentop, an American scholar of political philosophy who spent most of his long academic career at Oxford, tells how people who “made history” brought about this transformation while seldom realizing what they were doing. For Siedentop, who often uses the phrase “almost unwittingly” or words to that effect, historical agents have a sort of “innocence.”

Siedentop’s title focuses on the individual, and the subtitle mentions liberalism. The text emphasizes equality, and pits democracy against aristocracy. Each point deserves attention.

First, he defines the term “individualism” as “the retreat into a private sphere of family and friends at the expense of civic spirit and political participation.” This is very much Alexis de Tocqueville’s view, and almost the wording found in one of the most famous chapters of *Democracy in America*. But it is all the more surprising that the author sees modernity as the shift to “a model [of society] in which the individual *rather than the family*...is the basic social unit” (emphasis added). This raises the question of the last step towards individual-

ism, in which its Latin root, *individuus*, gives way to its Greek equivalent, *atomos*. In the absolute atomization of social life, the individual repudiates any dependence, including on that which makes him possible.

Second, Siedentop states that liberalism “preserves Christian ontology without the metaphysics of salvation.” If, however, “[t]he idea of the incarnation is the root of Christian egalitarianism,” one wonders what is left of Christianity if we drop this “metaphysics.” This in turn raises the question of whether a liberalism derived from Christian axioms can subsist in the long run.

Third, he tells how “natural inequality” was displaced by “moral equality.” The problem, however, is that equality can be realized as equal liberty, but runs the risk of degenerating into equal subjugation. What can tip the scales in favor of liberty?

The shift in the understanding of natural law that produced the idea of individuals’ natural rights was decisive. “Christian egalitarianism” is defined as the “care of souls,” Siedentop writes. Here we see how moral intuitions interfere. For the “pagan,” the Socratic and Stoic idea of care of souls implied no equality. Rather, it was a privilege of philosophers writing for philosophers. What made the differ-

ence was the “equality of humans in the face of their maker,” the “Christian understanding of the soul’s relationship to God,” which did away with the ancient hierarchic worldview.

**I**NVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL WOULD HAVE profited from a broader consideration of this point. Islam underlines the ultimate loneliness of the individual in front of his Judge: “No bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another,” as the Koran puts it. Yet, Islam did not develop any secularist or egalitarian tendencies.

Fourth, democracy is not just a political system but presupposes a whole view of man. Christianity brings about several waves of democratization: of heroism, which begins with the martyrs; and of authority, which begins in the monastic movement. Siedentop devotes a chapter to “the democratizing of reason,” which entails a “reconstruction of the self” and “the translation of a moral status into a social role.” “Reason’ (understood as a faculty commanding reality and very unequally distributed in society) was giving way to ‘reason’ (understood as an attribute of individuals who are equally moral agents).”

These four foundational concepts clarify Siedentop’s understanding of secularism as

the “systematic separation of church and state.” More precisely, its “central project” is “the identification of a sphere resting on the ‘rightful’ claims of individual conscience and choice, a sphere of individual freedom protected by law.” Secularization proceeds as “the separation of a private realm from the public sphere.”

**I**NVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL’S GREATEST benefit is that it enlarges our historical ken. That is, it disabuses readers of the notion that individualism, liberty, and democracy begin with John Locke or, at the earliest, the Renaissance. Siedentop traces the moral intuitions essential to liberalism to the Christian message, perhaps even the Hebrew Bible, and their systematic formulation back to lawyers of the 14th century or even to the Papal Revolution of the 11th century, the allegedly “dark” Middle Ages.

This explains the title of Siedentop’s final chapter, “Dispensing with the Renaissance.” As a polemical category of historiography designating Europe’s liberation from the shackles of the Middle Ages, “the Renaissance” is hardly older than the 19th century. In particular, since Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), it has been received wisdom that the emergence of the individual took place in the Italian Renaissance. Siedentop is right to distinguish “the pursuit of ‘individuality’—an aesthetic notion,” from

“the invention of the individual—a moral notion,” the latter being as old as Christianity’s emphasis on the private character of salvation.

**H**E KNOWS FULL WELL THAT HIS BOLD thesis is sure to antagonize, since it pushes back against the anti-clerical or even anti-Christian bias in historical writing that goes back to Edward Gibbon and the 18th century. According to Siedentop, this negative stance of the higher European intelligentsia towards Christianity was itself fostered by the Church’s excessive claims to control the whole realm of human life.

But this bias has blinded us to the glaring fact that modern secularism is not a reversion to a pre-Christian era. The ancient world, far from being secular, was suffused with awareness of the sacred. We look for religion in the wrong place, in the “feelings” of the individual. Little wonder that we hardly find it in the ancient world, barring some traces in the margins. For ancient man, religion belonged to the collective realm of the family and the public realm of the city. Siedentop repeatedly, and correctly, emphasizes the importance of the family run by a paterfamilias and centered on the altar of the family god. He underlines that ancient societies took stark hierarchies for granted: masters over slaves, and men over women. Their cosmology then reflected those social tiers.

Larry Siedentop exposes a baleful misunderstanding between Christianity and secularism, the former failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of its offspring, the latter forgetting its own origin or, worse, forging a fake genealogy that traces to the “pagan” world. In a peroration of sorts, he invites both sides to examine their conscience by learning a lesson in real history.

Both misinterpretations are excusable, though. Advocates of a radical secularism dissolve the original moral intuitions of Christianity into the excessive claims of the Church to control even the secular sphere. The Christian (and Muslim, for that matter) attacks secularism because of its “godless” caricatures that make him boil it down to “consumerism, materialism and amorality.” *Inventing the Individual* would have been strengthened by asking where these attitudes come from and offering the genealogy of a legitimate kind of secularism alongside the genealogy of its perversions.

Rémi Brague is professor emeritus at the Sorbonne, the Romano Guardini Chair at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, and the author of *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (University of Chicago Press) and *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (University of Chicago Press).

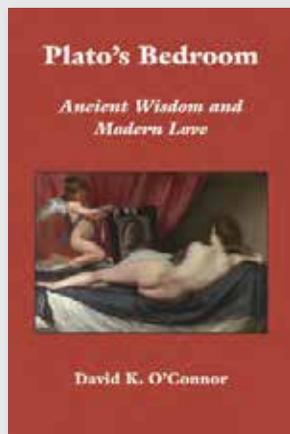
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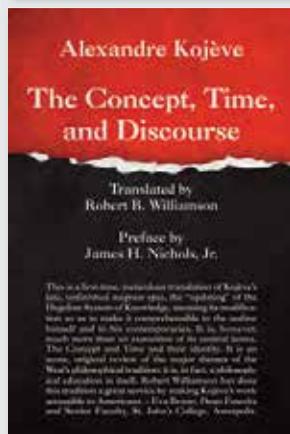


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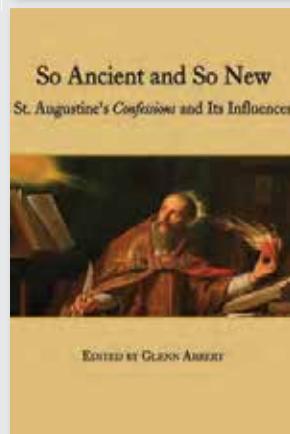
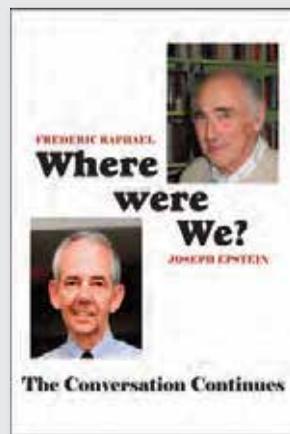
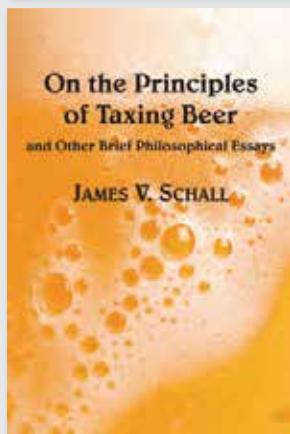
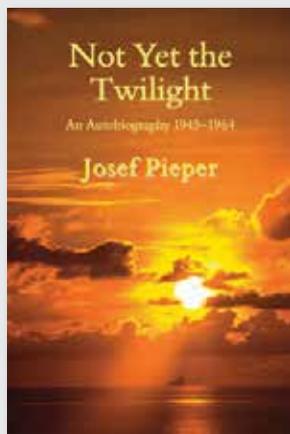


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