

# COLLOQUIUM: THE RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF WESTERN CULTURE

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Western traditions of liberty, equality and democracy are rooted in antiquity (both Israel and Greece), and especially in the Middle Ages, when many of the canonical writings of our tradition were rediscovered and received. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment on both sides of the Atlantic made explicit what had already been long understood.

From the 11<sup>th</sup> Century on, Church and State fought one another. Kings and emperors claimed a portion of the realm of the sacred that the Church sought to monopolize. For its part, the Church functioned as an agent of secularization: it compelled the state to give up its sacral aura, and assigned it its proper task: keeping civil peace, while respecting the soul of the individual as the only place of holiness. The distinction between throne and altar, the profane and the sacred, is a consequence of this conflict.

Christianity conceived of revelation not as the dictation of a law, but the self-disclosure of a Person. God is not present in history as a legislator, but as a source of help and forgiveness. He creates human nature as already endowed with the laws that promote its flourishing and well-being. Through our nature, we belong to a community of persons who, because they are created in His image, are endowed with an infinite dignity and with a freedom which mirrors His own freedom.

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