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Paper Title: The Dynamo and the Virgin: Henry Adams on Work and Leisure in American Culture

Abstract: Henry Adams (1838-1918) was a mordant observer of American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. He famously poised his own memoirs *The Education of Henry Adams* between Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Autobiography* of that famous icon of Max Weber's Protestant, capitalist work ethic—Benjamin Franklin. Adams used the symbols of the Dynamo and the Virgin to raise the question of the sanity of a society that pursued material, economic, military, and technological power at the expense of the spiritual, contemplative element of human culture. Adams contrasts what he calls the “religion of World's Fairs” with the monuments of medieval devotion to the Blessed Virgin at Chartres and Amiens. Following Leo XIII's call for a revival of the study of Thomas Aquinas in *Aeterni Patris* (1879), Adams called for modern career-oriented American universities to recover a form of education that enables workers to comprehend their place in a cosmic whole, to work with a contemplative respect for nature as a whole rather than as lone individuals bent on the conquest of material forces.

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## Introduction

This conference proposes to examine the “Heart of Work” in light of two historic anniversaries this month, the October Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which aimed at creating a “worker’s utopia,” and traditional “Reformation Day,” October 31, 1517, said to be the day that Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, insisting on the interior act of faith as the primary “work of salvation.” A conference that thus draws together these two dates, 1517 and 1917, the Protestant Reformation and the Communist Revolution, of course raises the question of the relationship between these two events—is there a long-distance causal relationship across the centuries of modernity between Luther’s revolt and the culture of social, economic, and political revolution that has gripped Europe in the centuries since? Can all the benefits or ills of these later events be laid ultimately at Luther’s door? These might seem historically naïve questions, but many a Western Civilization textbook of the twentieth century has made precisely this kind of causal trajectory the very backbone of its narrative.

In order to approach this large question with some level of modesty, I propose to look at the question of the modern attitude towards work in the writings of Henry Adams. Why Henry Adams? Who was Henry Adams?

Henry Adams was the twentieth-century progeny of the famous American Adams founding family—he was the great-grandson of John Adams and grandson of John Quincy Adams, the son of Charles Francis Adams. John Adams was the second president of the United States and, perhaps more importantly, a diplomat during the American War for Independence; John Quincy Adams was the last of the presidents of the Founding Era, but like his father his main contribution to American history was his diplomatic work during the so-called “second War for Independence,” the War of 1812; and Charles Francis Adams, as Abraham Lincoln’s ambassador to Great Britain during the American Civil War, continued the family’s diplomatic labors. While Henry Adams never held either elected or appointed office, he was best friends with John Hay, American Secretary of State and Ambassador to Great Britain under two presidents at the turn of the twentieth century. Adams, who famously built a duplex home across the street from the White House (now the Hay-Adams Hotel), certainly continued his family’s fascination with America’s role on the world stage. Recently Richard Brookhiser, the conservative editor of *National Review* magazine, has called the Adamses “America’s first dynasty” in a book devoted to these four Adamses.<sup>1</sup> A half century ago, Russell Kirk, in his classic text defining *The Conservative Mind*, saw the Adams lineage as crucial for the conservative intellectual tradition in America. For Kirk, what Edmund Burke was to English Conservatism, John Adams and his son, grandson, and great-grandson were for American conservatism.<sup>2</sup> Henry Adams (1838-1918) saw himself as bearing the weight of his eighteenth-century founding family’s ideals into the new world of the twentieth century.

Henry Adams, oddly enough, portrays himself in his autobiographical work as poised between the Protestant Reformation of 1517 and the Communist Revolution of 1917. He was both fully self-conscious of himself as a child of the Protestant Reformation and famous for predicting the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia a quarter of a century before it happened. Adams described himself proudly as “American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him” (The Press, 238) The Adams family had come over to America as part of the great

Puritan migration in the 1630s—Adams’s ancestors had literally come over on the Mayflower. Adams insisted that “the atmosphere of education in which he lived was colonial, revolutionary, almost Cromwellian, as though he were steeped, from his greatest grandmother's birth, in the odor of political crime” (Quincy, 7) While he could look back at the Protestant Reformation through the lens of his own family history, he looked forward at the coming revolutions of the twentieth century with great trepidation—he saw a coming apocalypse but wondered from whence would come the greatest threat to society: he facetiously yet quite seriously compared Woman to Russia, as two conservative forces on the national and international stage at the beginning of the twentieth-century, two “inert forces”—still caught in an older form of society, each with a centripetal movement, women’s lives circling around the cradle and Russian cultural life circling around the church; Adams speculated, what would happen if either were to suffer a revolution that would rip their forces from their centripetal movement around the cradle and the church with the destructive violence of nuclear fission.<sup>3</sup> Which revolution, Adams asked—sexual or Bolshevik—would have a more decisive impact on world history?

In 1905, this “American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him” wrote a diptych work of cultural criticism, his two books, *Mont-St.-Michel and Chartres* (published in 1912) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (published posthumously in 1918). These two books tracked what he saw as the centripetal forces of modern culture from medieval Christendom to the modern period. Adams described the culture of medieval Christendom as centering around what he called the “worship of the Virgin” which he explored in *Mont-St.-Michel and Chartres*, a book devoted to the art, architecture, literature, politics, philosophy, and theology of the age that built the create Marian cathedrals all over Southern France. Adams described the modern age as centering around what he called the “worship of the Dynamo” which he described in *The Education of Henry Adams*, a semi- or pseudo-autobiographical study of the great age of railway construction following the American Civil War. For Adams, railways construction was the great centripetal force of the turn of the twentieth century, leading to rising state power in America, in German, and in Russia.

Adams described the two books as a diptych essay: “study in thirteenth century unity” set alongside “a study in twentieth century multiplicity.” Adams laid out his explanation of the two works in a chapter of *The Education* entitled “The Virgin and the Dynamo.” The “Virgin” does not merely signify the Blessed Virgin Mary of Christianity, but also the feminine principle in culture in general—all that had ever been signified by Venus, Diana, Athena...the Seven Muses of the Arts, the Three Graces...Memoria, Sophia, Sapientia, Melancholia. The “Virgin” represents for Adams the spiritual power in a culture—the power of contemplation. Nor does the “Dynamo” merely signify an electric generator producing direct current capable of delivering power for industry. The “Dynamo” represents for Adams material power in a culture—mechanical, technological, financial—and the utilitarian mentality that refuses all questions beyond the practical. Of course, there is much in Adams’s “Virgin and Dynamo” contrast that is now familiar to many readers because of Josef Pieper’s wonderful classic text *Leisure the Basis of Culture*. Adams covers the same ground as Pieper’s contrast between the classical and Christian ideal of contemplation as the highest form of life and the modern world of total work. Adams’s capacious image of the “Virgin” to signify contemplative leisure is quite similar to the quotation from Plato with which Pieper introduces his text:

But the Gods, taking pity on mankind, born to work, laid down the succession of recurring Feasts to restore them from their fatigue, and gave them the Muses, and Apollo their leader, and Dionysus, as companions in their Feasts, so that nourishing themselves in festive companionship with the Gods, they should again stand upright and erect.

The idea that without the company of the Muses, the festive companionship of the spiritual powers, human life loses a certain dignity or stature, is common to Pieper and Adams's critique of the modern age.

What I would like to draw attention to in this paper, is not so much Adams's contrast between Virgin and Dynamo, contemplative leisure and utilitarian work ethic, which I think would take us over ground that is familiar to many.

Rather I would like to draw out Adams's insight that contemplation is in some sense a "principle of work." Contemplation of the teleological character of nature is the very heart of fruitful labor for a creature whose work is never more than co-creation. And this is most particularly true of the highest form of work—what might be called "social work," or the building up of society. Contemplating the teleological nature of the human person and human societies—an accurate gauging of philosophical anthropology—is the very heart of political work. Just as nature is not sheer raw material to our technology, human nature is not sheer raw material to the social sciences efforts at constructing a utopian state. Adams contrasts the ephemeral nature of the buildings and communities produced by the "religion of World's Fairs" with the permanence of the buildings and communities forged by medieval devotion to the Virgin at Chartres. Adams is overwhelmed by the work achieved in the building of the medieval cathedrals. Not only is he in awe of the unity in multiplicity of the art—the array of stained glass, statuary, arches, towers, spires, flying buttresses—but he is amazed at the achievement of social unity to which the work attests—social unity despite political and economic multiplicity: the warring branches of royal families, nations, guilds, religious congregations.

Adams is self-conscious of his historic role as America's first medieval historian. He insists that only "the instinct of despair" could have made him, "American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him," turn to the study of medieval Christendom to find some alternative to the world of total work that he finds so enervating in the twentieth century. But, after overcoming his original distaste for "the vast forests of scholastic science," he turns to the study of the medieval period—its art, architecture, literature, politics, philosophy, and theology—a flowering of culture that he attributes to the period's charisma for society-building or genius for associational life. Between the great imperial works of antiquity and the cult of the creative individual in modernity, he finds an era that understood and embraced the human person's social nature in all its diversity of associational expression. In his book *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres* (1912), Adams lays out a historical vision of what Russell Hittinger describes as the core of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity—the existence of genuinely distinct societies irreducible to either the state or the individual.

In the following two sections, I will lay out Henry Adams's portrayal of the modern world heading simultaneously in the direction of individualism and statism and then Henry Adams's portrait of the very different cultural tendency of medieval Christendom, towards the

multiplication of natural and civic societies give full expression to the human person's capacity for working in association with others for a variety of human goods.

### **Part One. *The Education of Henry Adams***

In his autobiographical book, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Henry Adams called twentieth-century America a “vast plain of self-content” (330).<sup>4</sup> Describing the period from the end of the American Civil War until World War I (1870-1914)—what has come to be called the Gilded Age or Progressive Era—Adams wrote that he “could see but one active interest, to which all others were subservient, and which absorbed the energies of some sixty million people to the exclusion of every other force, real or imaginary.” That one interest, the one power to which all American energies strained at the turn of the twentieth century, according to Adams, was the expansion of the railway system. “Adams had been born with the railway system; had grown up with it; had been over pretty nearly every mile of it with curious eyes, and knew as much about it as his neighbors,” and “[i]ncomplete though it was,” he wrote, “the system seem[ed] on the whole to satisfy the wants of society better than any other part of the social machine, and society was content with its creation, for the time, and with itself for creating it” (*Twenty Years After*, 330). With the railway came the vast movement of goods—the famous sales-catalogue world of the consumeristic individual, with no other social tie than the state which subsidized the railways. With the railway also came the coal mining industry that absorbed the labor of the huge new post-Civil War era migration of workers from Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe:

“In this great region from Pittsburgh through Ohio and Indiana, agriculture made way for steam; tall chimneys reeked smoke on every horizon, and dirty suburbs filled with scrap-iron, scrap-paper, and sinders formed the setting of every town...History told little about these millions of Germans and Slavs, who had overflowed these regions as though the Rhine and the Danube had turned their floods into the Ohio...The new American showed his parentage proudly; he was the child of steam and brother of the dynamo, and already within less than thirty years, this mass of mixed humanities, brought together by steam, was squeezed and welded into an approach to shape; a product of so much mechanical power, and bearing no distinctive marks but its pressure. The new American was the servant of the power-house, as the European of the twelfth century was the servant of the Church, and the features would follow the parentage.” (*Vis Nova*, 466)

Henry Adams became famous for his portrait of America's material self-complacency, founded on a complicity between increasing individualism and increasing reliance on the state, and his protest against this culture.

Henry Adams saw this culture as something new to America at the turn of the twentieth century, something that was not inevitable from the American Founding. “For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people had hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back, between two forces, one simply industrial, the other capitalistic, centralizing, and mechanical” (*Chicago*, 344). Adams said that he himself “had stood up for his eighteenth century, his Constitution of 1789, his George Washington, his Harvard College, his Quincy, and his Plymouth Pilgrims, as long as anyone would stand up with him” (*Chicago*, 343). Alexis de Tocqueville had visited with Henry Adams's grand-father, John Quincy Adams, during his

famous tour of America, when he described the incredible health of America's local, civic associational life—promoted by strong churches, healthy families, and a multiplicity of small newspapers promoting one thing or the other. But Henry Adams finds this pre-Civil War America disappearing, and a new post-Civil War culture of monopoly, state subsidy, consolidation, and regulation replacing it:

He had said it was hopeless twenty years before, but he had kept on, in the same old attitude, by habit and taste, until he found himself altogether alone. He had hugged his antiquated dislike of bankers and capitalistic society until he had become little better than a crank. He had known for years that he must accept the regime, but he had known a great many other disagreeable certainties—like age, senility, and death—against which one made what little resistance one could” (Chicago, 343).

Adams observed a transition in the meaning of the word “liberal”—from its eighteenth-century connotation to its twentieth-century meaning: “liberal,” which had once meant the self-governance of the property owner and resistance to the intervention of the state, came to mean reliance on the state's action in the whole spectrum of socio-economic life:

The matter was settled at last by the people...In 1893, [during the electoral struggle between a gold standard and high tariff Republican, McKinley, and silver-coinage progressive Democrat, William Jennings Bryan] the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once and for all, in favor of the capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery...Such great revolutions commonly leave some bitterness behind, but nothing in politics surprised Henry Adams more than the ease with which he and his silver [liberal Republican, Mugwump] friends slipped across the chasm, and alighted on the single gold standard and the capitalistic system with its methods; the protective tariff; the corporations and trusts; the trades-unions and socialistic paternalism which necessarily made their complement; the whole mechanical consolidation of force [...that] created monopolies capable of controlling the new energies that America adored (Chicago, 344-345).

In 1893, having carried out this vast work of economic, political, and social revolution, Adams says, “Society rested” (Chicago, 345). It was as if this “new thing” or *rerum novarum*, the monolithic political chasm between property and workers, state and individuals, was a positively new creation. Many observers would not agree with Henry Adams's timing—suggesting that the state's “social paternalism” only became a reality with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs—but Adams sees the roots of the way of thinking already in his own life.

Russell Kirk was right to see in Adams a Burkean vision of America before the Civil War. Adams portrays America during his youth as a society of what Burke described as “little platoons” and what Adams calls “nests of association”—families, local communities, churches, colleges, neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> The country was not yet dominated by Wall Street in New York or State Street in Boston, let alone by the small “Southern village” of Washington, D.C. which still lacked paved streets and hardly boasted any other federal building beyond the Post Office. Rather, America was still an eighteenth-century world where a particular family had its “family seat”—the local community in which piety to church and family reigned. “Before railways entered the New England town, every parish church showed half-a-dozen of these leading citizens, with gray hair, who sat on the main aisle in the best pews, and had sat there, or in some

equivalent dignity, since the time of St. Augustine, if not since the glacial epoch.”<sup>6</sup> Adams, with his opening chapter a hymn to the Adamses of Quincy with their social independence from Boston, and his later hymn to his English friend Charles Milnes Gaskell of the “Yorkshire Milnes” with their “social independence of London,” believes whole-heartedly in Burke’s eighteenth century vision of “little platoons” and laments the “disappearance of the social instinct” and of “nests of association” in post-Civil War America.

Adams described the character of the new American man that is forged by this new American materialist society:

The American thought of himself as a restless, pushing, energetic, ingenious person, always awake and trying to get ahead of his neighbors...That the American, by temperament, worked to excess, was true; work and whiskey were his stimulants; work was a form of vice; but he never cared much for money or power after he earned them. The amusement of the pursuit was all the amusement he got from it; he had no use for wealth...the American was to be met at every railway station in Europe, carefully explaining to every listener that the happiest day of his life would be the day he should land on the pier at New York. He was ashamed to be amused; his mind no longer answered to the stimulus of variety; he could not face a new thought. All his immense strength, his intense nervous energy, his keen analytic perceptions, were oriented in one direction, and he could not change it...They knew not how to amuse themselves; they could not conceive how other people were amused. Work, whisky, and cards were life (Chaos, 297-298).

Adams is nonplussed by a worker who lives to work, a worker who has no aspirations or pretensions to be a gentleman or a public man or a *paterfamilias*, a worker who has been stripped (as both Burke and Marx noted) of nation, church, and family, a worker who can find no use “for money or power after he earned them.” “The American mind...had been deflected in the pursuit [of money] till it could turn in no other direction. It shunned, distrusted, disliked, the dangerous attraction of ideals, and stood alone in history for its ignorance of the past” (Twenty Years After, 328).

While “America adored” its new economic power, and as the pursuit of economic power shaped the American character, Adams himself feels an “aching consciousness of religious void”—a void he senses even in the religious press, which has adopted “muscular Christianity,” “social democratic Christianity,” or the Jamesian “will to believe.” Such modern forms of Christianity—whether Unitarian or Evangelical—are not, in Adams’ eyes, truly “religious”—they aim at a temporal social utopia and demand merely faith in continuous economic progress as the basis for inevitable moral progress (Silence, 352).

It is at that moment that Adams visited France and became fascinated by the medieval society that created the great Cathedrals of the Virgin, particularly Chartres. Adams encounter with thirteenth century Normandy and its churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin awakened in him “a new sense of history” (Silence, 355).

This was the foundation for the contrast that Henry Adams famously drew in his *Education* between “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” between material power and spiritual power, between

the societies devoted to each, and the kinds of mind forged by devotion to each. An obsession with material power led the mind to see the world in terms of force or energy and harnessing energy to one's own purposes. Every object was easily comprehensible as a unit of force. "The American mind," wrote Adams, "likes to walk straight up to its object, and assert or deny something that it takes for fact; it has a conventional approach, a conventional analysis, a conventional conclusion, as well as a conventional expression, all the time loudly asserting its unconventionality" (Indian Summer, 369). Adams compares this mental approach to the electric overhead lighting of the St. Louis World's Fair. He contrasts this mental approach to the mind of his friend, John LaFarge, the French Catholic stained-glass artist who was showing him around the Norman cathedrals. It was a mind that wanted to comprehend the form and inherent nature of a thing, approaching it with a kind of piety for the mystery of its own teleological life. LaFarge's mind was like the natural dawn light and evening light refracted through colored glass that he studied: "His approach was quiet and indirect; he moved round an object, and never separated it from its surroundings; he prided himself on his faithfulness to tradition and conventionality; he was never abrupt and abhorred dispute...In conversation LaFarge's mind was opaline with infinite shades and refractions of light, and with color toned down to the finest gradations" (Indian Summer, 369-370, 371).<sup>7</sup>

In *The Education of Henry Adams* Adams condemns the consolidation of economic and political forces—politics pursuing, not justice, but a utilitarian utopia of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He believes this replacement of political prudence with a mere economic calculus and distribution of material energy tends to progressively override the original Founder's Constitution of limited government, checks and balances, power-checking-power, a multiplicity of social and civic forces.<sup>8</sup> "The fathers had intended to neutralize the energy of government and had succeeded, but their machine was never meant to do the work of a twenty-million horse-power society in the twentieth century, where much work needed to be quickly and efficiently done" (375). Adams is at a loss for how America can compete with other consolidating and imperial powers, such as Germany and Russia, in the twentieth century without throwing overboard the old American republican limitations on government. Nevertheless he detests the lock-step homogenization of society, the sole standard of efficiency in work, that has become the American mind in the philosophy of William James and John Dewey's pragmatism. "Society dropped every thought of dealing with anything more than the single fraction called a railway system. This relatively small part of its task was still so big as to need the energies of a generation, for it required all the new machinery to be created—capital, banks, mines, furnaces, shops, power-houses, technical knowledge, mechanical population, together with a steady remodelling of social and political habits, ideas, and institutions to fit the new scale and suit the new conditions."

Adams is Burkean in his distress that modern society "betrayed a preference for economists over diplomats or soldiers"—the "two eighteenth-century types" represented by the Lees of Virginia and the Adamses of Quincy. "The age of chivalry is gone," Burke had exclaimed, "That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever." Adams and Burke alike lament the death of statesmanship, the sense that the realm of politics is about anything higher than an economic partnership for the equal distribution of goods. "Society is indeed a contract," Burke famously wrote, "but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico



or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primæval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.” Human sociability is not exhausted in a single partnership based on self-preservation alone. Human sociability demands a plethora of associations, because human flourishing pursues a variety of goods, ordered indeed in a teleological fashion, but nevertheless genuine goods.

Aghast at the modern world’s whole-hearted submission to the vision of economic man, Adams turned and twisted about in search of some alternative. Trying to understand the medieval culture that created the Cathedrals, he eventually turned to the study of St. Thomas Aquinas: “The pursuit turned out to be long and tortuous, leading at last into the vast forests of scholastic science...Only with the instinct of despair could one force one’s self into this old thicket of ignorance.” Like Dante, lost in a dark forest, *nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita*, so Adams begins a new education with a new guide.

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## Part Two. *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres*

In his greatest effort of medieval history, *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres*, Henry Adams lets out a great cry of “Eureka!” He found in medieval Christendom a form of social unity without uniformity, a genuine unity in multiplicity. Quite literally, this old man, “American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him,” commences a new love affair with “the Virgin” who he seemed stunned to have encountered for the first time in his historical studies. He expresses his outrage that both his Puritanism and his German academicism had blinkered him to such an extent that he had never perceived the rich social life of medieval Christendom.

“When Adams was a boy in Boston, the best chemist in the place had probably never heard of Venus except by way of scandal, or of the Virgin except as idolatry...Here opened a totally new education...The force of the Virgin was still felt at Lourdes, and seemed as potent as X-rays; but in America neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force—at most as sentiment. No American had ever been afraid of either...The Woman had once been supreme; in France she still seemed potent, not merely as sentiment, but as force. Why was she unknown in America?” (The Dynamo and the Virgin, 383-4).

But it was not just that America’s native Puritan culture had left Adams in darkest ignorance of the Middle Ages. Even the new German historians of the period focused so exclusively on the political history of rise of the state in the Holy Roman Empire that they never spared attention to the French and English developments in art, theology, and culture. “His German bias must have given his youth a terrible twist” (Silence, 354). As Adams travelled in his old age around Normandy with the leisure to study the stained-glass and read St. Thomas’s *Summa*, the “bare playgrounds of the lecture system turned into green and verdurous virgin forests” and “threw off all association with the German lecture-room (Silence, 354).

Adams expresses himself in a spasm of enthusiasm for the sheer work of building that was accomplished by medieval society. He describes spending his summers, in his seventies, driving around in his new car, trying to track the “force of the Virgin” in the centuries of building the crusading cathedrals:

He left St. Louis [and the World’s Fair] May 22, 1904, and on Sunday, June 5, found himself again in the town of Coutances, where the people of Normandy had built, towards the year 1250, an Exposition which architects still admired and tourists visited, for it was thought singularly expressive of force as well as of grace in the Virgin. On this Sunday, the Norman world was celebrating a pretty church-feast -- the Fête Dieu -- and the streets were filled with altars to the Virgin, covered with flowers and foliage; the pavements strewn with paths of leaves and the spring handiwork of nature; the cathedral densely thronged at mass. The scene was graceful...The power of the Virgin had been plainly One, embracing all human activity; ...He had set aside the summer for study of the Virgin, not as a sentiment but as a motive power, which had left monuments widely scattered and not easily reached. The automobile alone could unite them in any reasonable

sequence...For him, the Virgin was an adorable mistress, who led the automobile and its owner where she would, to her wonderful palaces and châteaux, from Chartres to Rouen, and thence to Amiens and Laon, and a score of others, kindly receiving, amusing, charming and dazzling her lover, as though she were Aphrodite herself, worth all else that man ever dreamed. He never doubted her force, since he felt it to the last fibre of his being, and could not more dispute its mastery than he could dispute the force of gravitation...He was only too glad to yield himself entirely, not to her charm or to any sentimentality of religion, but to her mental and physical energy of creation which had built up these World's Fairs of thirteenth-century force that turned Chicago and St. Louis pale.

"Both were faiths and both are gone," said Matthew Arnold of the Greek and Norse divinities; but the business of a student was to ask where they had gone. The Virgin had not even altogether gone; her fading away had been excessively slow. Her adorer had pursued her too long, too far, and into too many manifestations of her power, to admit that she had any equivalent either of quantity or kind, in the actual world, but he could still less admit her annihilation as energy.

So he went on wooing, happy in the thought that at last he had found a mistress who could see no difference in the age of her lovers. Her own age had no time-measure. For years past incited by John La Farge, Adams had devoted his summer schooling to the study of her glass at Chartres and elsewhere, and if the automobile had one *vitesse* more useful than another, it was that of a century a minute; that of passing from one century to another without break. The centuries dropped like autumn leaves in one's road, and one was not fined for running over them too fast. When the thirteenth lost breath, the fourteenth caught on, and the sixteenth ran close ahead. The hunt for the Virgin's glass opened rich preserves. Especially the sixteenth century ran riot in sensuous worship. Then the ocean of religion, which had flooded France, broke into Shelley's light dissolved in star-showers thrown, which had left every remote village strewn with fragments that flashed like jewels, and were tossed into hidden clefts of peace and forgetfulness. One dared not pass a parish church in Champagne or Touraine without stopping to look for its window of fragments, where one's glass discovered the Christ-child in his manger, nursed by the head of a fragmentary donkey, with a Cupid playing into its long ears from the balustrade of a Venetian palace, guarded by a legless Flemish *leibwache*, standing on his head with a broken halbert; all invoked in prayer by remnants of the donors and their children that might have been drawn by Fouquet or Pinturicchio, in colors as fresh and living as the day they were burned in, and with feeling that still consoled the faithful for the paradise they had paid for and lost. France abounds in

sixteenth-century glass. Paris alone contains acres of it, and the neighborhood within fifty miles contains scores of churches where the student may still imagine himself three hundred years old, kneeling before the Virgin's window in the silent solitude of an empty faith, crying his culp, beating his breast, confessing his historical sins, weighed down by the rubbish of sixty-six years' education, and still desperately hoping to understand. (Vis Nova, 468-470).

Adams is full of the idea that he himself, as an American and as a modern, can hardly hope to grasp the cultural force of the era. He practically despairs of conveying it to his modern American readers.

Adams is amused that the Americans seems to think that the cult of the Virgin was a late imposition on the pure Christianity of the biblical era. "You will certainly ask when this exaltation of the Virgin began, and unless you get the dates, you will doubt the facts" (Virgin of Chartres, 425). Adams points to the Council of Ephesus in 431 and describes the cult of the Virgin as co-terminous with the rise of the church, Mater Ecclesia, to a position of equality with Imperium. "As God-Mother, Deipara, Path-finder, she was the chief favorite of the eastern empire, and her picture was carried at the head of every procession and hung on the wall of every hut and hovel" (Virgin of Chartres, 425). Mary was an Icon of the Church, the Ecclesia who sacramentally gives birth to new Christian members of the Mystical Body of Christ in each generation. The complex relation between the Marian iconography and the *Corporis Mystici* meant that in the medieval mind, according to Adams, "Christ and the Mother are one." "This is the Church of Christ! If you seek him through me, you are welcome, sinner or saint; but he and I are one" (Abyss of Ignorance, 428). The Church, as bride of Christ, was united to Christ, the true bridegroom. The Virgin, the Ecclesia had no independent power; her power to forgive sins was the power of the Cross. Adams noted that mystics and scholars alike, merchant guilds and military orders all vied in the cult of the Virgin as Queen (427). "Just as the French of the nineteenth century invested their surplus capital in a railway-system in the belief that they would make money by it in this life, in the thirteenth century they trusted their money to the Queen of Heaven because of their belief in her power to repay it with interest in the life to come" (428).

Russell Hittinger points out that this doctrine of the Church as a real society, distinct from the state, is at the very core of Catholic social teaching, particularly on the principle of subsidiarity:

"The existence of social persons distinct in dignity, reducible neither to the individual nor the state, stands at the outset of Catholic social doctrine. As well it should, for the Church claimed to be a *persona moralis* instituted by Christ. Moreover, nested within this trans-jurisdictional ecclesial society were a host of subsidiary societies: families, religious orders and congregations, sodalities, colleges, associations of pilgrims, warrior orders, and a myriad of other associations, like guilds, which overlapped with municipal and temporal societies. Even into 18th century, the Catholic Church was an extraordinarily diversified and interdependent social order."

The Ecclesia was a society *par excellence*. Indeed, as Pierre Manent has argued, the recognition of the ecclesia as a society distinct from the state was a civilization-transforming moment.

Having once imagined a distinction between the temporal city or empire and the spiritual community, the Western European civilization was set free from the consolidation of authority typical of the classical world.<sup>9</sup> Manent suggests that the conception of “the nation” arose in the imaginative space thus opened. In fact, a triumvirate of natural group-persons appeared: the ecclesia, the familia, and the patria. The person’s moral obligations of piety towards God, father, and country appeared distinct, though over-lapping, in a way unique to the Christian world, quite different from the classical unified worship of the hearth fires that Fustel de Coulange describes in his classic work *The Ancient City*.

Adams captures a double vision: unity in multiplicity. On the one hand this cult of the Virgin created an amazing cultural unity, but on the other hand, as Hittinger puts it, “nested within this trans-jurisdictional ecclesial society were a host of subsidiary societies.” The Ecclesia was the society *par excellence*, but rather than absorbing all human energy in herself, she, divine-like, gave birth to a multitude of societies. Pierre Manent has argued that nations are societies that were born of the Church; a similar argument could easily be made of the family as a society independent from the state, forged out of the Church’s insistence on marriage as a sacrament and ringing it round with all the power of canon law.

But Adams is even more intrigued, not by the great triumvirate of natural societies, Ecclesia, Familia, Patria, but by the multitude of lesser societies that acquired such cultural thickness during the same period. He points to this lively society-forming tendency as a historical phenomenon—“not so much because it surprises us, as because it surprised even more the people of the time, and the men who were its instruments.” The “evident astonishment” of contemporaries at the spontaneity of the popular movements involved in the crusades and the building of the great medieval crusader cathedrals, brings home to Adams the novelty of the phenomenon (436). Medieval men and women “formed associations” of all kinds...each with their own dress, their own insignia, their own chapels, their own hymns and canticles, flags, and images of the Virgin. “Water-carriers, Shoemakers, Grocers, Bakers, Pastrycooks, Turners, Weavers, Curriers, Money-changers, Drapers, Butchers, Bankers, Teamsters.” Chartres Cathedral, Adams insists, for all its Royal Portals, “was a local shrine, in an agricultural province, not even a part of the royal domain, and its Cathedral was the work of society, without much more tie than the Virgin gave it” (Court of the Queen of Heaven, 506). Adams finds the charm of Chartres to be both its “want of unity” and its “unity”—“The windows of Chartres have no sequence, and their charm is in variety, in individuality, and sometimes even in downright hostility to each other, reflecting the picturesque society that gave them” (507).

Russell Hittinger makes it clear that the French Revolution in particular aimed at the destruction of precisely this plethora of societies.<sup>10</sup> Hittinger also points to the completion of that work of destruction in the twentieth century. He notes that the French Law of Associations which had just been passed in 1901 giving the state a monopoly on group personhood, property-ownership, and perpetuity. Observing the 1901 Law of Associations and the 1905 Separation law establishing state secularism, Henry Adams was as stunned as the French Catholics themselves to be told that all of the great cathedrals had, with one stroke, become public property and that all of their congregations held their existence at the pleasure of the state’s law. In a series of letters, Adams expressed his sympathy for the pope, his desire to return to the twelfth century, and the strange turn of events that left French Catholics, like the New England non-conformists, contemplating

the need to abandon their churches and “sing at home.”<sup>11</sup> The privatization of the Ecclesia was a signal of the complete monopoly of the state on group-personhood in the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

While Henry Adams draws out a clear contrast between the medieval and the modern, he does not directly point a finger at Luther or the reformers for the destruction of this culture of association. But recently, the political philosopher and Catholic convert from Lutheranism, Jean Bethke Elshtain argued that “the overall effect of Luther’s political theology is to strip individuals of social embeddedness.” Elshtain concurs with Jacques Maritain’s thesis that Luther is the inventor of the modern individual—at once a “self-certain self” and ever-possessed of “moments of existential dread” because of its new unsocial loneliness. According to Luther, Elshtain argues, “the world of fallen man is fundamentally orderless, hence order must be imposed.” The older vision of the human person—whose interior space is a piazza in which objective familial, ecclesial, and native relations abound, becomes the modern vision of the individual, alone in “a kind of radical, interior subjectivity.” This is what Elshtain, following Troeltsch calls “the impoverishment of Lutheran social theory...having no theory of a form for social life other than the state.”

Elshtain, like Adams, sees Luther’s political theology mirrored in what she called “Luther’s masculinization of theology.”

The institution Luther aimed to strip of all authority was construed in gendered terms as female, specifically as mother, *mater ecclesiae*. The Church as mother is evoked early on in patristic literature. The Church brings forth new life and nourishes all humanity at her breast...The symbolic-sacral moment of Luther’s masculinized discourse lies, then, in his explicit diminution of the symbol of the Holy Mother and his repudiation of maternal tropes and metaphors more generally. *Salve Regina* chanted medievalists: Hail, Holy Queen. Hail—and farewell—Luther insists.<sup>12</sup>

Elshtain’s thought here opens up a panorama of social revolution: the group persons or corporate personhood were figured as female: Ecclesia, Famila, and Patria. Indeed, as Russell Hittinger suggests, our very knowledge of natural law, and the “unity of order” in society, is figured as female when it is figured as Wisdom. He notes that St. Thomas Aquinas’s favorite scriptural reference for natural law is the Book of Wisdom 8: “O wisdom [Sapientia], who orders all things firmly and sweetly [fortiter suaviterque].” This *Sapientia* or “*sancta Sophia*” is the *Primum Gratiae*, the first grace given to Adam and Eve. “The scriptural hexaameron crowns the six days of creation not with another natural kind, much less with an aggregation of material forces, but with a society... God declared the unity of order at the sixth day ‘very good’.” Elshtain’s mind boggles, as Henry Adams’s did, at all that we lost when we lost the feminine figure of *Mater Ecclesia*.

Perhaps Adams’s great contribution to our reflection on the legacy of the Protestant Reformation 500 years after, is precisely his incredible sensitivity to the vast visual, symbolic silence created by Puritanism in America, still today, the largest majority Protestant country in the world. During the centuries in which counter-reformation Baroque covered Europe with images of nursing Madonnas and neo-classical icons of Charity, dancing Muses and lyrical Graces, ecstatic

saints and heroic virgin martyrs, New England was visually silent with regard to women. Eulogies and tombstones spoke of their virtues, but Adams felt that a Boston education was an education wholly in Mars and not in Venus, an education for action, for war, not for contemplation or sublime self-sacrifice. “From women,” Adams lamented, the American “got the domestic virtues and nothing else. He might not even catch the idea that women had more to give.”<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *America's First Dynasty: The Adamses, 1735-1918* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (originally published 1953, Gateway Editions; 7th Revised edition, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973, originally 1918). All in text citations come from this version of the text. See Henry Adams, Chapters 30 and 32, "Vis Inertiae (1903)," "Vis Nova (1903-4)." Henry Adams, *Mont-St-Michel and Chartres* (Modern Library Edition, 1983). All in text citations come from this version of the text.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Garnett, "The Story of Henry Adams's Soul: Education and the Expression of Associations," *Minnesota Law Review* Vol. 85 (2000-2001).

<sup>6</sup> Like the "Dynamo," the railway is a symbol of modernity for Adams as it was for Dostoevsky. In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky allows one of his characters, Lebedeff, to discourse (passionately and drunkenly) on railways as the fulfillment of the sign in the Book of Revelation, "a star called Wormwood": "What does the source, or 'spring' of life really mean in the Apocalypse? You have heard of the 'Star that is called Wormwood', prince?" "I have heard that Lebedeff explains it as the railroads that cover Europe like a net." "Do you mean to say that railways are accursed inventions, they are a source of ruin to humanity, a poison poured upon the earth to corrupt the springs of life." "Not railways properly speaking, presumptuous youth, but the general tendency of which railways may be considered as the outward expression and symbol! We hurry and push and hustle for the good of humanity! 'The world is becoming too noisy, too commercial!' groans some solitary thinker. 'Undoubtedly it is, but the noise of wagons bearing bread to starving humanity is of more value than tranquility of soul,' replies another triumphantly, and passes on with an air of pride. As for me I don't believe in these wagons bringing bread to humanity. For, founded on no moral principle, these may well, even in the act of carrying bread to humanity, coldly exclude a considerable portion from enjoying it. That has been seen more than once... That has been seen already... Malthus was a friend of humanity, but with ill-founded moral principles, the friend of humanity is the devourer of humanity... IN the twelfth century... There must have been an idea more powerful than all the sorrows and calamities of this world, famine and torture, leprosy and plague—an idea that entered into the heart, directed and enlarged the springs of life, and made even that hell supportable to humanity! Show me a force, a power like that, in this our century of vices and railways! I might say perhaps our century of steamboats and railways, but I repeat in our century of vices and railways because I am drunk and truthful! Show me an idea that unites men nowadays with half the strength as it did in those centuries, and dare to maintain that the 'springs of life' have not been weakened and polluted beneath this 'star,' beneath this network in which men are entangled. Don't talk to me about your prosperity, your riches, the rarity of famine, the rapidity of the means of transport! There is more of riches but less of force. The idea united heart and soul to heart and soul exists no more. All is loose, soft, limp..we are all of us limp.

<sup>7</sup> T. S. ELIOT's *Four Quartets*: "Burnt Norton" seems to make a similar comparison between mental sloth and true philosophic leisure:

"Here is a place of disaffection  
Time before and time after  
In a dim light: neither daylight  
Investing form with lucid stillness  
Turning shadow into transient beauty  
With slow rotation suggesting permanence  
Nor darkness to purify the soul  
Emptying the sensual with deprivation  
Cleansing affection from the temporal.  
Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker  
Over the strained time-ridden faces



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Distracted from distraction by distraction  
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
Tumid apathy with no concentration  
Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind  
That blows before and after time,  
Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs  
Time before and time after.”

<sup>8</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the relationship between the original Madisonian Constitution and the Catholic principle of subsidiarity see Russell HITTINGER, “The Coherence of the Four Basic Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine: An Interpretation” in *Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together*, Fourteenth Plenary Session, 1-6 May 2008 *Acta 14*, eds Margaret S. Archer and Pierpaolo Donati, Vatican City, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Manent, “What is a Nation?” *Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Russell Hittinger in a hefty footnote:

“No religious congregation may be formed without an authorization given by law which that determine the conditions of its exercise...The dissolution of a congregation or the closing of any establishment may be declared by a cabinet decree’. French Law of Associations, title III, §13 (1 July 1901). In his fine study of the Revolution’s rejection of ‘the society of orders and *corps*, or corporations’, Pierre Rosanvallon emphasizes that Isacc-René-Guy Le Chapelier and his colleagues meant by *régime corporatif* more than the specifically economic institutions. They meant a regime consisting of plural societies, each with its own distinctive legal bonds, usually with its own distinctive signs and costumes, together making up the whole of the body politic: estates, religious corporations (clerical and religious congregations), guilds, clubs, municipalities, and so forth. If property-owning corporations exist, said Jacques-Guillaume Thouret, they differ from natural individuals who possess innate faculties and rights. ‘Corporations are merely instruments fabricated by the law for the greatest possible good’. They are trustees of a public service mission located in the state. Rosanvallon notes: ‘But the essential question was philosophical: corporate ownership inherently raised the prospect of a rival to public authority. The corporations in a sense threatened the state’s claim to a ‘monopoly on perpetuity,’ a perpetuity being in the order of temporality the equivalent of generality in the order of social forms’. Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France Since The Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28.

In this connection, we should bear in mind original meaning of ‘solidarity’. In France, *solidaires* were those bound together in collective responsibility, according to the semiautonomous societies called *communautés*. The idea of *solidarité* was drawn remotely from the legal expression *in solidum*, which, in Roman law, was the status of responsibility for another persons’ debts. Usually, the legal status of *solidaires* presupposed membership in a society (nation, family, etc.) that persists over time and is not exhausted in a single exchange nor characterized as a limited liability partnership. The Napoleonic Code (1804) expressly forbade the presumption of *solidarité* (art. 1202) in order to underscore the ontology of natural persons bound together chiefly, or only, in the state, and secondarily by contracts engaged by individuals. Thus, one becomes a *solidaire* only contractually (arts. 395-396, 1033, 1197-1216, 1442, 1887, 2002). With the revolutions which followed in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, and with the onset of the industrial revolution, the term ‘solidarity’ began to acquire the plethora of meanings it has today: solidarity of workers, political parties, nations, churches, and humanity in general. This was due to the widespread alarm at the disintegration of society and a renewed interest in intermediate associations. The historical evolution of the term is tracked within the Jewish community by Lisa Moses Leff, ‘Jewish Solidarity in Nineteenth-Century France: The Evolution of a Concept’, in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Mar., 2002), 33-61. The more global history is provided by Steinar Stjerno, in *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).”

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, HA to Charles Milnes Gaskell, May 25, 1906, *Letters*, 6:19; HA to Elizabeth Cameron, August 22, 1906, *Letters*, 6:26; HA to Elizabeth Cameron, August 27, 1906, *Letters*, 6:27; HA to Anna Cabot Mills Lodge, February 13, 1908, *Letters*, 6: 119; HA to Ward Thoron, July 31, 1910, *Letters*: 6: 354.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Luther’s Two Kingdoms and the Eclipse of the Female [Mater Ecclesiae],” *Meditations on Modern Political Thought*.

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<sup>13</sup> HA, “Washington,” *The Education*, 31. “Women counted for little as models. Every boy, from the age of seven, fell in love at frequent intervals with some girl—always more or less the same little girl—who had nothing to teach him, or he to teach her, except rather familiar and provincial manners, until they married and bore children to repeat the habit. The idea of attaching oneself to a married woman, or of polishing one’s manners to suit the standards of women of thirty, could hardly have entered the mind of a young Bostonian, and would have scandalised his parents. From women the boy got the domestic virtues and nothing else. He might not even catch the idea that women had more to give. The garden of Eden was hardly more primitive.”

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