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Democracy in Postmodern America:
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with American's System of Society and Government.

Peter Bigelow
Honors Thesis
December 9th, 2013

“I stopped listening to the prosecutor until I heard him say, ‘Has [Meursault] so much as expressed any remorse? Never, gentlemen. Not once during the preliminary hearings did this man show emotion over his heinous offense.’ . . . Of course, I couldn’t help admitting that he was right. I didn’t feel much remorse for what I’d done . . . I had never been able to feel much remorse for anything . . . I started to listen again, because the prosecutor was talking about my soul.

He said that he had peered into it and that he had found nothing . . . He said that the truth was that I didn’t have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men’s hearts, was within my reach . . . ‘But here in this court the wholly negative virtue of tolerance must give way to the sterner but loftier virtue of justice. Especially when the emptiness of a man’s heart becomes, as we can find it has in this man, and abyss threatening to swallow up society.’”¹

Free societies need absolute morality to survive. Morality is the governor that controls free citizens’ actions, and without an absolute morality, a free society will devolve into chaos as people do whatever they please, justifying it by their own personal moral standards.

America, founded in a quest for personal liberties, was the first in a long future of free societies that would offer their citizens freedoms that were seen as natural rights to all men. One theme that the founding fathers stressed was that this freedom did not come without responsibility. They emphasized how critical morality was among the citizens of their new free nation. George Washington proclaimed in his farewell address to the nation after his two terms as president that, “It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?”² Washington and the rest of his colleagues all believed that a popular government—a democracy or republic³—would only be able to survive if the citizens

¹ Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 1989, 101.

² George Washington, “Washington’s Farewell Address” (Yale Law School Avalon Project, 1796), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

³ There is a popular and constant debate over the differences between terms “republic” and “democracy.” While it is true that the two forms of government are different—a republic placing ruling power in the hands of representatives while a democracy places power directly into the hands of the people—these differences are outside the scope of this paper. This paper focuses on free governments run by the people, and whether they are run directly or by representatives is not relevant to this thesis. Therefore, I will focus more on maintaining historical accuracy in the

governed themselves with an absolute morality, because that would act as the source of guidance for their actions concerning issues that the law did not address. They intended their new government to be minimalistic and not interfere with citizens' free lives in unnecessary ways, so morality was needed to control the citizens' actions and keep them from doing socially detrimental things. As will be examined at length later, from America's beginning, her citizens possessed such a morality, and its presence helped establish America as the most influential free society in the world.

Although America was founded with a strong sense of civic morality, the nation has become increasingly progressive over the years, and Americans have begun to reject the concepts of absolutes, moral values, and higher authority in favor of personal relativism, pragmatism, and individual authority. This is done in the name of progress; society is supposedly advancing toward a higher degree of success, conquering the oppressive and archaic notions of absolute morality and concrete truth in favor of a liberating relativistic worldview. Rather than encouraging society to ground itself in absolute values, this progressive worldview rejects the principle of common absolutes in favor of individual relativism. These ideas sound pleasing, but are they true progress? Does this shift toward a Postmodern society set society up for long-term success matching that which she has enjoyed up to this point? Although this shift in worldview is done in the name of progressivism, the only thing it will progress American society towards is collapse. A foundation of absolutes and moral values is a critical element for any free society, and America is no exception.

citation of resources and their individual uses of the terms "republic" and "democracy" rather than attempting to use one term throughout the paper. I will use the original term that was used by each source quoted rather than change the term. For this reason, the terms "republic," "democracy," "popular government," and "free government," and "free society" should be read as interchangeable in this paper. I do not seek to ignore that there are differences between these terms, but these differences are outside the scope of this paper and I will not spend time on them.

This paper seeks to dispel the notion that the recent shift from absolute morality to moral relativism is indeed progressive in America. First, it will examine the concept of social morality and why it is critical in free societies. Following this, the history of America's social morality will be examined, demonstrating that America has historically possessed the morality that is the "necessary spring" of free societies. After establishing both the need for social morality and the evidence of this morality throughout America's history, the recent rise of Postmodernism and moral relativism and the accompanying threats will be discussed, showing that this trend is a departure from the path to social health that America had been following since her inception. This paper will conclude with a brief discussion of the threat that this departure poses to American society.

The above excerpt from Albert Camus's philosophical novel *The Stranger* gives readers a look at what happens to a man when he rejects absolutes in favor of a moral relativism that bases right and wrong on one's own personal choices. In the story, Merseault, the protagonist, killed a man but did not regret his actions because he had rejected moral absolutes and convictions. He did whatever he pleased without regard to any higher moral standard that would govern his actions, and this led him to remorseless murder. The climax of the book comes when the prosecutor calls for the court to find Merseault guilty, arguing that even though Merseault did not feel remorse or believe he had done anything wrong based on his personal moral convictions, the court could not rule based on tolerance of someone's personal morality but had to rule based on justice—a justice grounded in an absolute morality. He had revealed Merseault's emptiness of heart and declared that this lack of morality and conviction would destroy a society if left unchecked. Although *The Stranger* is a philosophical novel and not a political or social commentary, the prosecutor's declaration makes a salient point regarding free societies and civic

morality. Since free societies only minimally restrict their citizens in their actions, citizens' morals must act as further restraints. If every individual in a society was to live based solely on personal moral standards, as did Merseault, there would be no common conviction to restrain, and that society would quickly devolve into chaos.

Defining Social Morality

Before discussing morality and its role in a democracy at length, a contextual definition of morality must be made. The dictionary defines morality as "Principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior."⁴ This is a simple definition but it lacks precision in the context of social morality. Questions such as what these principles are and how they are enforced require a narrower definition that specifically addresses the kind of morality that the founding fathers insisted was critical to democracy. Herfried Münkler, a German political scientist and professor of political theory at Berlin's Humbolt University, supplies an excellent definition in his article *Civil Society and Civic Virtue*. Münkler's definition of civic morality, or civic virtue as he calls it, is that citizens willingly deny their personal interests in favor of something that is beneficial to their society as a whole.⁵ This definition answers both questions raised above. The specific principles of social morality will vary from one society to another, but a general principle is the sacrifice of one's self-interest in favor of society's interest. There are actions that might benefit an individual but harm a society as a whole. Stealing from a store, for example, may bring financial benefit to an individual, but it hurts the store as well as other consumers who must pay higher prices as the store seeks to make up lost profits. If many members of a society decide to pursue their own interests and neglect their society's, their society will suffer.

⁴ Angus Stevenson and Christine Lindberg, eds., "Morality," *New Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, August 1, 2010).

⁵ Herfried Münkler, "Civil Society and Civic Virtue. Do Democratically Constituted Communities Require a Socio-moral Foundation?," *International Review of Sociology* 8, no. 3 (November 1998): 428.

The second question—how these principles are enforced—is answered by Münkler’s definition as well. He claims that the sacrifice of self-interest for social interest must be willing. For one to be virtuous, his denial of self-interest must be made on his own volition, not a result of pressure by outside force that threatens him. If it is only the result of outside force, the person is simply denying the original self-interest in favor the more urgent self-interest of avoiding the threat. True civic virtue, according to Münkler, is a *willing* sacrifice of self interest for social health.

Democratic Societies Need Moral Foundations

Freedom is one of the elements of a society that its citizens hold most dearly, but if that society is to remain stable, the freedom which its citizens have must be held in check by some authority. This authority can either come in the external form, such as the government, or an internal form: civic morality and self-governance. Since democratic governments offer high amounts of personal freedom, they require equally high amounts of self-governance—the ability and willingness to control that freedom—from their citizens. In a free society, the government cannot force its citizens to act in ways contrary to the will of the majority. Therefore, if such a society is to endure, her citizens must have civic virtue, willingly acting in ways that put the long-term health of the society ahead of their own individual desires. This idea was born alongside the idea of free societies with representative governments during the Enlightenment. European thinkers who influenced revolutionaries in France and America insisted that free societies would only work if the citizens were virtuous. Jean-Jeaques Rousseau argued for the legitimacy of a representative government and a free society, but he insisted that a free society would not work without morals. “A country cannot subsist well without liberty, nor liberty

without virtue.”⁶ In other words, a nation must have freedom to survive, and this freedom cannot exist without morality. Edmund Burke went even further than did Rousseau, claiming that liberty without virtue was not only unsustainable, but evil in itself. He condemned it as “folly, vice, and madness.”⁷ To those who birthed the idea of the free society and representative government, this form of society would only ever work if such a society’s citizens were virtuous.

This idea was not just an antiquated one held by Eighteenth century scholars. It has been held by educated men across centuries. John Hallowell, a professor of political science at Duke University from 1943-1982, promotes this theory in *The Moral Foundation of Democracy*. He writes that free societies depend on the morality of the citizens, which is comprised of both “the commonly shared knowledge that there are restraints” as well as the “willingness of individuals voluntarily to submit to those restraints.”⁸ In other words, the people in a democracy must commonly accept a law higher than themselves (the law that sets forth the restraints that Hallowell mentions) and must be willing to conform to this law (submitting to the restraints set forth by the moral/value system). This mirrors Münkler’s definition of civic virtue. Charles Finney also believed that the success of government relied on the morality of the people. He believed, much like Hallowell, that for a society to be successful it had to be run in accordance with moral law. In Finney’s opinion, the optimum society was one comprised of citizens with a strong sense of morality and self-governance served by a representative government. If, however, the people did not possess morality enough to uphold civic virtue on their own, then a stronger form of government would be needed to enforce the laws for the health of society, he

⁶ “Quotes on Virtue” (The American Institute for Liberty, 2009), www.liberty1.org/virtue.

⁷ “Quotes on Virtue.”

⁸ John Hallowell, *The Moral Foundation of Democracy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 64.

explained.⁹ This harkens back to the idea expressed earlier that every society needs an authority to hold the citizens' freedoms in check, whether it be self-government or a strong external government. If people want the freedoms that come with a minimalist representative government, they must uphold civic virtue on their own volition, without the enforcement of the government. Charles Finney and John Hallowell are two men from different backgrounds and different centuries, yet they share nearly identical views of morality and government. The differences in their backgrounds and dates of birth show that their beliefs in this matter were not just a niche theory or a fad, but that it was a principle whose validity showed itself to scholars in different fields across many years.

Gaylen Byker, a former international businessman and president of Calvin College, joins in the argument for morality in society, providing an economic argument for the necessity of morality among citizens of a free society. He explains that a free market economy requires virtues such as honesty, respect, self-control, and responsibility.¹⁰ The citizens in a free market economy, he writes, must have the qualities of promise keeping, industriousness, and delaying their gratification.¹¹ He goes on to explain why each of these are important in a free market:

Keeping promises, even when not in one's immediate self-interest, produces honoring of contracts, regard for reputation, reciprocity, and a long-term perspective. It is a norm that courts can implement and enforce. Industriousness recalls that work is a God-given vocation, a calling, parallel to duty, and produces wealth, incentives, and an attitude of rewarding performance, not power. Deferral of gratification is a hallmark of enlightened self-interest, willingness to plan ahead, sacrifice, being patient, and taking the long-term view. As a norm, it produces a combination of desire for economic advancement with prudence and patience to serve others as well as self. In the long run, reputation for fairness, respect for others, and keeping promises produces more profit, and a system that rewards savings and investment.¹²

⁹ K. Alan Snyder, "Charles Finney: Should Christianity Mix with Politics," *Continuity: A Journal of History* 23 (1999): 71-77.

¹⁰ Gaylen J. Byker, "The Religious and Moral Foundations of Civil Society and Free Market Economy.," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 13, no. 1/2 (January 2001): 1-14.

¹¹ *Ibid* 8-9.

¹² *Ibid*.

The state cannot force traits like these upon its citizens; they must come from within the individual—from his or her morality. Therefore, for a society to foster a free market, its citizens must possess absolute morality and self-governance. Byker also argues that, just as morality is essential for a free market, a free market is essential for a free democratic society. In short, Byker’s economic argument is that since a common absolute social morality is essential for a free market, and a free market is necessary for a healthy free democratic society, a common morality among citizens is essential for that society’s health and freedom.

The above examples explain the need for free societies to have civic virtue. An argument was presented by a scholar from three of the most important institutions in any society; John Hallowell and Herfried Münkler hailed from the field of social studies, Charles Finney from the religious arena, and Gaylen Byker contributed an economic perspective. The need for civic virtue is not just an idea promoted by one social institution or in one time period, it is a truth that can be approached from many different perspectives and will result in the same conclusion: free societies need morality to survive.

A Free Society’s Morality Must Be Absolute from a Source Higher than Man’s

Mind

It is not enough that a society’s citizens share a common morality, this morality must be absolute, and it must be based in a source higher than human reason. As discussed above, the role of morality in a democratic society is to guide citizens into doing what is right—what is best for their community—even when it requires personal sacrifice. It acts as the consistency and the authority in a free society—rather than the state—which guides the citizens into civic virtue. Morality acts as a society’s consistency providing, to borrow Hallowell’s words once again, “commonly shared knowledge that there are restraints,” and acts as society’s authority by

providing the “willingness . . . to submit to those restraints.”¹³ If morality is based on human reason, it loses its consistency and its authority. The consistency disappears because the human mind is ever changing. Oscar Wilde put it succinctly: “The only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes. Change is the one quality we can predicate of it. The systems that fail are those that rely on the permanency of human nature.” An example of the inconsistency and chaos that will come from a reliance on human reason instead of a higher authority can be found in the American and French Revolutions. The French and American revolutions shared many similarities. Both nations rebelled against an oppressive monarchy to gain the liberties they believed were their natural rights; both revolutions sought to replace their government with a representative republic; and both countries’ ideas were based on Enlightenment philosophers’ views. Why then, if the two revolutions shared much in origins and goals, did the French Revolution fail to produce the longstanding government they desired while the American Revolution resulted in a shining republic that has lasted over two centuries and remains the foremost example of freedom to the world?

The difference between the two revolutions that caused the failure of one and the success of the other was the basis in which the principles of the two revolutions were anchored. Both the French and the Americans based their revolutions on Enlightenment ideas, but the French founded these insights on the human mind and reason, whereas the Americans based them on an absolute, divine authority.

Because of this absolute basis, the majority of America’s founders believed the liberties they defended were God-given, as evidenced in the opening lines of the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are *created* equal, that they

¹³ Hallowell, 64

are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable rights.” [emphasis added] ¹⁴ This passage clearly shows that America’s founders believed that man was intentionally created by a personal being and that he received rights from his Creator that should never be taken away. Accepting the fact that these rights were God-given was particularly important to Jefferson, who asked in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?” ¹⁵ Here Jefferson stressed that the natural rights the colonists sought to gain originated from God, claiming that if one believed otherwise, there was nothing preventing these liberties from being taken away. In addition to anchoring in divine absolutes their belief of their rights, America’s founders based their desire for a republic on the same authority. Thomas Paine railed against monarchies in *Common Sense*, claiming they were the ideas of “heathens” and that they could not be justified either by natural law or by scripture. He argued that God established a republican form of government for Israel to operate under and that this was the form of government that was most scripturally founded. ¹⁶ Benjamin Rush, another influential leader of the American Revolution, expressed in letters to John Adams and Thomas Jefferson that republican governments agreed with many principles of the Gospel and that they were the type of government that best supported the spread of the Gospel. ¹⁷ The well-known leaders of the revolution were not the only ones who based their support of republicanism on a higher authority. A resolution signed by the citizens of Malden, Massachusetts, is an example of the

¹⁴ Declaration of Independence.

¹⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 208.

¹⁶ Paine, “Common Sense.”

¹⁷ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 68.

general public advocating a republic as the right system of government based on divine mandate. The resolution stated that a republic was the only form of government these townspeople desired to live under, and that it was their duty as God's followers to form such a government.¹⁸ Basing their support of republicanism on truths from a source greater than the human mind gave the colonists an anchor to hold the revolution's goals firm in the face of opposition and change.

The French, on the other hand, lacked this anchor. Although the French knew what they wanted to escape through their revolution—the inequality and oppression they faced under the monarchical form of government—the rights they desired and the ways in which they sought to gain these rights were based only on human reason. Reason replaced God, and religion was discredited because it was seen as an opposition to reason. Many of the *philosophes* believed that, for educated men, truth could be discovered and based not on God but on reason and science.¹⁹ This belief caused many of those who followed the *philosophes* to discard the absolute authority of God and rely on that which the human mind conceived. During the first half of the revolution, there was a radical deChristianization in which the church was discredited and religion was replaced by reason. This destroyed any absolute foundation, which led to disunity of belief. When Robespierre came to power, he opposed the extreme atheism of deChristianization and instituted the Cult of the Supreme Being. Being a creation of the human mind, however, this did not last. Napoleon outlawed the cult soon after he came to power. During the revolution, there was no higher standard by which to judge truth, so there was nothing to hold one idea over another as more right. The cycle of governments that came to power throughout the French revolution proves this. Those who favored Montesquieu's system instituted the constitutional

¹⁸ Citizens of Malden Massachusetts, "America Should Declare Independence."

¹⁹ Himmelfarb, *Roads to Modernity*, 151-156

monarchy, but they had no higher support for their views than those who argued for a republic and they were eventually overruled. Likewise, those who supported a republic had no better foundation for their beliefs than those who sought other forms of government, such as Napoleon and his empire. Had the French had an absolute authority by which to judge their views, they would have been more united in their ideas about what system of government to pursue. As it was, the absence of a foundation based on an unchanging authority led to disunity throughout the French revolution, resulting in the cycle of governments that failed to achieve the goals of the revolution.

A comparison of these two similar revolutions shows that if conviction is based in human reason, it will fail because of the instability of the human mind. Moreover, it loses its authoritative power because, being rooted in a human source, it has no higher authority than human desire. To provide a stable foundation to a free society, the morality upon which that society is based must be absolute and derived from a source higher than man's mind.

A History of America's Moral Foundation

The religious beliefs of the founding fathers has always been a controversial topic. There are those who vehemently argue that the majority of the founding fathers were Christians and that America was created as a Christian nation, and there are equally as many who oppose this argument, claiming that those who formed America did so out of secular interests with only a passing thought to religious faith.²⁰ Those who take a stand, regardless of which side on which they stand, usually are guilty of twisting some facts and ignoring others. Even if all of the facts are properly presented, the definition of "Christian" is open to a wide variety of interpretations

²⁰ David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012). ; "Christianity and America," accessed July 19, 2013, www.faithofourfathers.net.; "Our Founding Fathers Were Not Christian" (freethought.mbdojo.com, July 5, 2011), <http://freethought.mbdojo.com/foundingfathers.html>.

that renders an overarching claim about the specific religious beliefs of the founders impractical. What cannot be debated, however, is that America was created upon a foundation of absolute morality. The men who founded America shared a common sense of morality, and they all believed this morality was given to them from a source higher than themselves. The men who worked together to develop the idea of America and ultimately create the new nation shared a common sense of virtue. Many of the American revolutionaries were Christians, and of those who were not, most still believed in God in a deistic sense and drew their morals from this belief. These moral principles served the founders in two ways: they led them to guide their lives by their morality, and they led them to create a form of government that relied on these morals.

First examine George Washington, America's patriarch. Although he was a very intelligent and capable man, he was by no means the most intellectually gifted of the founders. His vice president John Adams claimed that Washington was "too illiterate, unlearned, [and] unread."²¹ Thomas Jefferson mentioned in a letter to Dr. Walter Jones that Washington's "mind was great and powerful, without being of the very first order; his penetration strong, though, not so acute as that of a Newton, Bacon, or Locke."²² However, what he may have lacked in high-end intellectualism, he more than made up for in virtue. The well-known tale of Washington cutting down a cherry tree as a boy only to come clean to his father because he could not bring himself to tell a lie is folklore, but the principle of the story is rooted in truth: Washington possessed impeccable character. Thomas Jefferson, in the same letter quoted from above, highly praised Washington's character expressing things such as, "His integrity was most pure," and, "his character was, in its mass, perfect."²³ Specific qualities that Jefferson admired in

²¹ George Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006), 33.

²² Thomas Jefferson, *Light and Liberty: Reflections on the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Eric Peterson (United States: Modern Library, 2005), 30.

²³ *Ibid* 30-31.

Washington were his prudence, his desire for justice, and his selflessness. American Revolutionary historian Gordon Wood, in his book *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, also highlights Washington's character, recounting an instance where Washington was offered shares in two canal companies. Washington was hesitant to accept these shares, fearing that it might tarnish his reputation if he was seen as accepting something that could be seen as a "pension" for his service as President. However, he did not want to appear ungrateful by not accepting the shares. This ethical dilemma caused Washington more anguish than it would have most, and he sought advice from many of his colleagues, including General Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. In the end, he decided on a compromise, accepting the shares and then donating them to the (future) Washington and Lee University.²⁴ Washington could have gained significant personal assets by keeping the shares, but he chose instead to protect his integrity and not act in any way that could have been seen as unethical.

Washington's vice president John Adams was another founder with a strong personal morality. His moral foundation was, like Washington's, built from his childhood. He was raised a Christian with strong morals, and although he may have deviated from Evangelical theology in his adult life, he did not loosen his moral convictions.²⁵ His peers respected him highly for his strong sense of morality; Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson commented on his high honesty.²⁶ Adams was also a man of conviction who was willing to sacrifice personal gain in order to do the right thing. For example, Adams served as the attorney for the British soldiers accused of killing the colonists in the Boston Massacre. Although Adams was just as patriotic as any other colonist, he believed that the British soldiers deserved a fair trial, and he did not let his patriotic passions overrun his desire for justice. In the end, four of the six soldiers that Adams

²⁴ Wood, 44-45.

²⁵ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 18.

²⁶ Wood, 177

represented were acquitted. Adams's role in this case hurt his law practice—over half of his clients left him—but he still believed that he had done the right thing in representing the soldiers for a fair trial.²⁷ In his diary a few years after the trial, Adams proclaimed that defending the soldiers was “one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested actions of my whole life, and one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country.” [sic]²⁸ Willing to suffer setbacks for practicing his values, Adams clearly held his morality in high regard.

Thomas Jefferson also valued morality and virtue highly and wrote extensively on the subject. The question of Jefferson's personal faith is too deep to address in full in this essay, as there have been numerous books written from both sides of the argument, but it is apparent from Jefferson's own writing that he was not a Christian in the sense of believing in an active and personal God whom one's belief in is necessary for salvation.²⁹ However, his lack of Christian conviction did not affect his morality. He believed that Jesus was the highest example of morality and strove to live his life following Jesus's example and encouraged his countrymen to do the same. For example, he once wrote to a friend on the importance of truth, insisting that at all times the exact truth was the right answer. He claimed that honesty would be beneficial down the road.³⁰ In another letter, he explained that neither money, nor fame, nor science—even the earth itself—was more important than morality and that it would be better to give all of these up than to act immorally.³¹ Jefferson's writings point to a high standard of personal morality that

²⁷ “Key Figures in the Boston Massacre Trials” (University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, n.d.), <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bostonmassacre/keyfigures.html>.

²⁸ “The Boston Massacre Trials” (John Adams Historical Society, n.d.), <http://www.john-adams-heritage.com/boston-massacre-trials/>.

²⁹ In a letter from Jefferson to Benjamin Rush in 1803: Jefferson called himself a “Christian,” but was quick to specify that he was only a Christian in the sense that he followed Jesus's teachings and tried to live by them, but did not believe that Jesus was anything more than a morally excellent man. (Jefferson, 36)

In a later letter to another friend, Jefferson critiqued Christianity harshly, declaring the gospels to be shams, nothing more than “vulgar ignorance, . . . superstitions, fanaticism, and fabrications.” (Jefferson, 34)

See also: David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

³⁰ Jefferson, 23.

³¹ Jefferson, 52.

was also pushed upon his fellow patriots whom he encouraged to value morality as highly as did he.

The only founder who perhaps wrote more on the subject of virtue than Thomas Jefferson is Benjamin Franklin, author of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which was full of wisdom and advice. Franklin was yet another patriot whose strong sense of morality contributed to America's moral foundation. As the oldest of the founders, Franklin enjoyed the position of the most experienced in life, and his experiences had instilled in him a virtue that he held in high honor. He filled *Poor Richard* with adages advocating industry, financial prudence, and humility. In addition to his *Almanac*, Franklin had "Thirteen Moral Virtues," which included topics such as temperance, justice, chastity, and humility.³² He explained that he ultimately wanted to acquire all of the thirteen virtues, and as such, would practice habituating one at a time until he had achieved his goal. He organized each of the virtues in the order that he thought would be the best order of approach and sought to master one and then move on to the next. Ideas like this are what helped Franklin live his life according to the high standards of virtue which he set out for himself.

The aforementioned men were by no means perfect. Washington owned slaves, Jefferson is rumored to have fathered many children out of wedlock, Adams was a harsh father at times, and Franklin drank too much. However, these men were but human and could be expected to fail morally at times. These failures, however, were exceptions to the strong moral character that these men held.

The founders held virtue in high regard for more than just personal good. The founding fathers believed that virtue was necessary for the stability of the nation they sought to form. They wanted a government that would offer its citizens unprecedented freedoms but they knew that these freedoms could not go unfettered. To sustain a free government, the people of America had

³² *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 1, 2 vols., 8th ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 534-535.

to possess enough civic virtue to restrain themselves where government would not. In his farewell address to the nation, Washington insisted that religion and the virtue in which it resulted were vital to a republic.

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity.”³³

Indispensable supports. Clearly, the man who led America in the Revolution and for eight years as her first president believed that the morality of her citizens and its absolute source were vital to the survival of the Republic. John Adams held this belief just as strongly as did Washington, contending that, “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.”³⁴ He believed that all governments relied on the morality of their people, but when government gave their citizens more freedoms, the need for public virtue was even more critical—“*morality alone* ... can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The *only* foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue” [emphasis added].³⁵ Adams strongly believed that America would only function if her people possessed this sense of virtue, not only in a general sense because she was a free society, but because of the very nature of America’s Constitution. He insisted that the Constitution, which set tight limits on the government’s power to ensure that its role would remain limited, was “inadequate” for governing a people who were not sufficiently self-governed.³⁶ The word Adams uses here—inadequate—suggests that he believed that the amount of freedom given to the people is the very aspect of the Constitution that would render it void in an immoral society. The Constitution is inadequate to govern such a people, because the Constitution in itself does not

³³ Washington.

³⁴ “Quotes on Virtue” (The American Institute for Liberty, 2009), www.liberty1.org/virtue.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ “Quotes on Virtue” (The American Institute for Liberty, 2009), www.liberty1.org/virtue.

give the government an abundance of power. It allows American people vast amounts of freedom on the premise that these freedoms would be restrained by the men's and women's personal morality. If the people under this constitutional government were to not govern themselves, the government established by the Constitution could work. Adams's beliefs here follow the same principle as Charles Finney's idea of government, that a minimalist government representative of the people would only result in a successful society if the people upheld civic virtue out of their own will. Adams argued that the Constitutional government of the new America depended on the foundation of morality held up by the American citizens and that if this foundation was destroyed, the government could not stand.

Like Washington and Adams, Jefferson also believed that a strong sense of virtue among citizens of a free nation was vital to the health and freedom of that nation. Jefferson offered his own explanation of what public virtue was in his mind, and his view was identical to Gaylen Byker—civic virtue was citizens' willingness to sacrifice their personal desires for the good of the community. "Virtue may be defined as the love of the laws and of our country. As such love requires a constant preference of public to private interest, it is the source of all private virtue."³⁷ Here Jefferson explains that one's love of his country should motivate him to prefer his nation's well-being over his personal well-being. He believed that this moral mindset was necessary to sustain America. "It is in the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour [sic]... degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats into the heart of its laws and constitution."³⁸ If the people lost their morality, their lack of virtue would degrade the Constitution and the government to the point of failure.

The theme that morality was necessary in a free society was not limited to only the presidents and famous founders. Political scientists Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Quotes on Virtue

undertook a thorough study in which they analyzed every piece of American political writing from the revolutionary era, and found that in those documents there was an overwhelming theme of the importance of morality in a free government.³⁹ Obviously, it was not just the most popular minds that agreed with this sentiment. The majority of those taking an active part in the politics of the new America agreed that if their experiment in democracy was going to work, the citizens needed civic virtue.

Benjamin Franklin went even further in this belief, claiming that a society that neglected morals would soon lose its freedom and need the control of a stronger government. “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become more corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.”⁴⁰ This is nearly identical to Charles Finney’s later argument that the level of self-governance of the people was the determining factor in what type of government was best for that particular society. He and Franklin would both agree that societies with less morals—“more corrupt and vicious”—would need a more controlling form of government.⁴¹ When people’s morals do not restrain them from harming each other and in turn society, their government must step in and do the job. This would infringe upon the freedoms that the citizens enjoy, but it would be necessary for the health of the society. Take, for example, the stop-and-frisk laws in New York City. Those against the laws insist that they violate the 4th Amendment because they subject citizens to search and seizure without due process. On the flip side, the police and the politicians in favor of these laws argue that these programs are necessary to curb the violence the city experiences. If the citizens were guided by a stronger sense of morality rather than given to their selfish violence, these laws would not be needed because the people would restrain themselves from acting violently. As it is, however, the lack of self-governance

³⁹ K. Alan Snyder, *If The Foundations Are Destroyed: Biblical Principles and Civil Government* (United States: Xulon Press, 2010), 145.

⁴⁰ K. Alan Snyder, “Great Quotes by Benjamin Franklin” (Pondering Principles), accessed August 6, 2013, <http://ponderingprinciples.com/quotes/franklin/>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

necessitates—in law enforcement’s eyes—the tradeoff of freedom and privacy for security that the stop and frisk laws offer. This is an example of what Franklin and Finney argued, that the less self-governance a people had, the more controlling government they would need. The impassioned Patrick Henry advanced this argument a step further, claiming that tyrants found their way to power when the people of a nation neglected their morality.⁴² This is the argument that John Hallowell elaborated on in *The Moral Foundation of Democracy*, where he laid out a progression of an immoral society which ultimately ends in tyranny. He explained how the people would begin resenting any form of control, including self-control by their own morals. They would divide into three classes: those hungry for power, those hungry for money, and those with little interest in power and even less money. Conflict would arise between the classes and eventually the third class would choose a leader to protect themselves from the first two classes. This leader would begin as a national hero but, as with anyone in a position of power who lacks self-governance, would thirst for greater and greater power and gradually would begin ruling with a heavier fist. The leader who was supposed to protect the people’s interests would eventually end up using the people to advance his own interests, ending in tyranny.⁴³ This theory is an elaboration on Henry’s claim that “tyrants forge their chains” when the citizens of a nation lose their personal morality.⁴⁴ Although a society that loses its morals may not experience this exact regression into tyranny step by step, it will eventually give itself to a more controlling form of government. A democracy cannot work if a society’s citizens are not self-governed by a common sense of morals; the society loses its common direction and source of guidance. For the society to remain stable, it must have a source of direction and guidance, and in the place of a common morality by which the citizens guide themselves steps a leader who will guide the

⁴² Quotes on Morality

⁴³ Hallowell, 111-112.

⁴⁴ Quotes on Virtue.

people. This leader will begin running the society the way he thinks best, which will inevitably lead to him forcing his will upon the people, ending in tyranny. The only way to maintain a free society is for that society to get its source of common guidance from its citizens' common sense of civic virtue and morality.

Social Morality in American History

The idea of democracy in America worked because her citizens had this common morality at her inception and continued this civic virtue for many years down the road. The shared absolute value system allowed the American people to guide themselves in lives in which the government did not interfere. A popular theory has become cliché, that America was founded as a “Christian nation.” This is not entirely true. Many of the original Americans were Christians, but the country was founded with an emphasis on religious freedom which would allow the practice of any religion. Oppression from the state church of England was a major factor in the decision to form a new nation, and the founders of this new nation were not going to begin another country with a state controlled religion. In 1790, shortly before the Bill of Rights went into effect, a group of Jews sent a letter to George Washington asking for assurance that their religious liberties would not be infringed upon. In his response, Washington praised America and her citizens for being an example to mankind of unparalleled liberty and reassured the Jews that the American government did not allow discrimination against people based on religion. All that was asked of any American citizen was that he conduct himself with prudence, and they would be allowed to exercise their religious freedom however they so chose.⁴⁵ Twelve years later, Thomas Jefferson received a similar letter from Baptists in Danbury Connecticut, asking the president for assurance that they would not be persecuted by the state on account of their religious preferences. Jefferson replied that he believed that religion was a matter to be kept

⁴⁵ George Washington, “George Washington’s 1790 Letter to Touro Synagogue” (Americans United for Separation of Church and State, 1790), https://www.au.org/files/images/page_photos/washingtons-letter-to-touro.pdf.

“between a man and his God,” and that there was a “wall of separation between Church and State,” guaranteeing that the state would not interfere with anyone’s freedom of religion.⁴⁶ Jefferson cited the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of religion and forbids the government to establish a state religion. This amendment quickly dispels the myth that America was founded as a Christian nation. It can be more accurately stated that America was founded as a moral nation.

However, although America did not sponsor an official state religion, Americans’ religious beliefs did act as an anchor for their morality that stabilized their free society. From her beginnings, American society was rooted in religion; religion was a major player in the population of the new world, the Revolution, and the formation of young America’s society.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans began leaving their native countries for the New World for a variety of reasons, but one of the primary reasons was the search for religious freedom. England ran a state church system and required her citizens to practice Christianity in the manner decided by the Church of England. Those who disagreed with England’s way of worship could be fined or imprisoned. Many citizens wanted to worship differently but were prohibited. To solve this problem, they emigrated to Holland early in the seventeenth century where they could worship freely as they desired, but the situation was not ideal. Life in Holland was strenuous and began causing the Separatists to age more quickly than usual. Also, William Bradford wrote in *Plimoth Plantation*, living among the Dutch was offering temptations to the Puritans’ children to stray from their Christian morals into “extravagant and

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert E. Bergh, vol. 16 (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1904), 281-282.

This letter is the origin of the phrase “separation of church and state,” which is commonly misinterpreted to mean that the church should have no influence in matters of the state. When read in context, however, it can clearly be seen to mean that the state is to have no control over how the church exercises its freedom of religion. Rather than a restriction placed on the church, it is a restriction placed on the state to protect the church from governmental control.

dangerous courses.”⁴⁷ Once more, the Puritans decided to move their families to another place. This time, motivated in part by the religious liberties it would offer and in part by the opportunity to bring the Christian message to unreached areas, they decided to travel to the New World across the Atlantic.⁴⁸ The Puritans knew that this move would be difficult, but they were willing to face the challenges in exchange for the freedom that life in the New World offered. The Christian colonists were not the only people to take up life in the New World, but they were by far the largest demographic. Patricia Bonomi, professor of history at NYU, claims that the colonies were almost entirely protestant.⁴⁹ In his article *Religion and the American Revolution*, Derek Davis backs up Bonomi’s lofty claim with more detailed information, citing historian Mark Knoll explaining that three-fourths of the colonists were Protestant Christians.⁵⁰ The faith of these colonists played a large role in their daily actions as they guided their lives by the principles given to them by the Bible. To them, daily decisions were not just made on the basis of what seemed best to them, but what was the righteous and moral thing to do in any given circumstance. Davis worded it clearly when he wrote that for the Puritans, “All aspects of life . . . needed to be brought into subjection to God.”⁵¹ They valued their faith highly and sought to live out the morals that their Christianity taught.

It was, in fact, this strong religious conviction that played a major role in the colonists’ decision to rebel against England and form a new nation. Derek Davis claimed that religion influenced the colonists so much that the sole reason for the Revolution was the colonists’ belief

⁴⁷ William Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation* (Boston, MA: Wright & Potter Printing Co, 1952), 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-35.

⁴⁹ Patricia U. Bonomi, “‘Hippocrates’ Twins’: Religion and Politics in the American Revolution.,” *The History Teacher* (Long Beach, Calif.) 29 (February 1996): 137–144.

⁵⁰ Derek H. Davis, “Religion and the American Revolution,” *Journal of Church & State* 36, no. 4 (September 1994): 713.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 714

that they were doing God's work.⁵² While this may be a bit of an overstatement, the colonists' religious beliefs were the main source of justification for their rebellion. The colonists believed that they had God-given rights to certain liberties and privileges, such as religious freedom and the right to representation in government, and when these liberties were infringed upon by the British government, the colonists thought that they had the right, and even the duty, to rebel against the British government and form their own government that would liberally offer these freedoms. The opening paragraph of the *Declaration of Independence* addresses this:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them . . .⁵³

Every one of the signers of the *Declaration*, representing the colonists as a whole, believed that God gave man rights, and that when these rights were violated, it was necessary for the people whose rights were being taken to rebel against the violators. This statement is only in the introduction of the *Declaration* and commonly gets overlooked, but the fact that it is only a short part of the document and comes with no explanation does not mean that it is inconsequential. On the contrary, that this statement receives no accompanying reasoning or explanation speaks volumes because it shows that this is an *a priori* belief. It needs no further justification—it is known to be true by all. Jefferson was able to be so concise in this section of the *Declaration* because he knew that the logic of the statement needed no further support. One of Jefferson's inspirations in this belief was John Locke, who wrote in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* that if a government was using illicit force against its people, then the people had the right to use force to remove that government from power.⁵⁴ The founding fathers

⁵² Davis, 709.

⁵³ Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence" (The History Channel Website, n.d.), <http://www.history.com/topics/read-the-declaration-of-independence>.

⁵⁴ John Locke, "Right of Revolution: John Locke, Second Treatise" (University of Chicago Press, 1690), <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch3s2.html>.

believed that God had given them rights and that He had also given them the right to defend those rights against an invasive government. A dangerous and costly war in which America would be greatly outmatched was not the preferred path of action for the colonists, but when it became apparent that this was the only course through which they would be able to win their rights, they felt justified in war because they were fighting for rights which were were God given.

After convincing the colonists to come to the New World and giving them justification in revolution for a new government, religion and morality continued to play a large role in America by shaping her culture and society. Although America's Constitution prohibited a national religion, American society was deeply religious and Americans were expected to conform to moral standards based in religious beliefs. Donald Scott refers to this concept as a "Creedal society:" a society in which the people conform to standards not only out of religious conviction, but because it is the national norm.⁵⁵ Moral standards dictated by Christianity were social norms, and living in accordance to those standards was considered to be the only acceptable way to live.

The influence of Christianity did not stop at causing Americans to live moral lives. Christianity's influence, and the resulting morality, permeated society even further. Many Americans believed that God wanted their new nation to be His nation, spreading the message of the Gospel to the rest of the world, especially the unreached areas of the world such as Western America and Latin America. This idea was first promulgated by the Puritans. Before the idea of a separate nation had even been conceived, John Winthrop in 1630 proclaimed that the colony in the New World to which the Puritans were traveling would be a "City on a Hill," referring to Matthew 5:14, and that the world would see them as an example of Godliness and virtue.⁵⁶ This

⁵⁵ Scott, Donald M. "The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny." *Divining America*, TeacherServe©. National Humanities Center. 9/7/13. <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/mandestiny.htm>>

⁵⁶ [ushistory.org](http://www.ushistory.org), "Massachusetts Bay — 'The City Upon a Hill'" (Independence Hall Association, September 7, 2013), <http://www.ushistory.org/us/3c.asp>.

idea that God had called Americans to spread His gospel persisted throughout America's colonial period and when the colonies became a nation, the idea of a divine purpose found its way into the people's image of their new nation. By the early nineteenth century, this idea had a name: Manifest Destiny. This belief was not just something held by religious leaders—it was widely shared by Americans in general. One evidence of this is America's use of manifest destiny to unapologetically justify the war with Mexico and westward expansion. Robert Walker, Secretary of Treasury from 1845-1849, believed that America should annex Texas as a way to spread their Christian influence further west because "A higher than earthly power . . . has selected our great and happy country as a model and ultimate centre of attraction for all nations of the world."⁵⁷ The fact that manifest destiny was able to influence America's foreign policy attests to how widespread the influence of Christianity and morality was in American society.

Another example of the strength of religious and moral conviction across the nation arose before and during the Civil War. Slavery was, of course, one of the most significant issues leading up to the conflict between the North and the South, and some of the most compelling arguments for both those for and against slavery were moral arguments. Pro-slavery advocates argued that the Bible never specifically prohibited slavery and therefore it was acceptable. Some took it even further, claiming that the Bible advocated slavery, citing Genesis 9, where Noah curses the descendants of Ham to be slaves of Japheth's descendants. They claimed that whites were Japheth's descendants and blacks were Ham's so slavery was simply the result of the curse. Abolitionists argued that slavery was against God's law because of the way it was practiced in the South. Even if slavery of any sort could be Biblically justified, the abusive treatment that the slaves were subject to in America was patently immoral.⁵⁸ Midway through the 1860s, The Bible

⁵⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 704

⁵⁸ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 31-50.

and morality were again evoked to justify or condemn the South's secession from the Union. The South believed that the war was partially a battle for their freedom to interpret the Bible the way they had been regarding slavery: if slavery was outlawed, they felt that they would not be able to freely exercise their religion. The North, on the other hand, believed that the war was a fight for equality of man, and the ethical treatment of everyone, which they believed to be moral issues. On both sides, there were those who believed that the war was God's will and it was brought about by Providence, notes theologian and historian Mark Noll in his book *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. This paper does not seek to argue the validity of either of the sides' use of morality as an argument for their respective positions. However, the existence of the moral arguments demonstrates once again how heavy the influence of morality was in America in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Civil War was one of the most significant events in America's history, and the fact that morality played such a large role in both sides' arguments over the issues of the war shows how deeply entrenched in society morality was.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of America's strong morality, though, comes in the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville in his seminal work *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville and a colleague were sent by the French government to America to study America's prison system, but while they were in America, they also studied American society and how America's democracy was attained and sustained. One of the major factors in the stability of America's democracy, he found, was her people's strong morals. He noted that America was a particularly religious society. He writes that the religious nature of America was the first aspect of the society to catch his attention when he came to the country and that the longer he resided in America, the more apparent America's deep religious roots became. One particular point he noted about American society's religious holdings was the relation in America between religion and liberty. Tocqueville wrote that in France, religion and freedom worked against each other,

but in America they worked together. Different religions were represented—most of them some variety of Christianity—and some people practiced their religion more out of habit than out of conviction, but the majority of Americans at that time followed a religious creed and drew their morality from that creed. Tocqueville argued that this common sense of morality gave Americans a higher authority by which to judge their moral choices and held in check the liberty that was given to the Americans through their democracy.⁵⁹ This point mirrors the founding fathers' argument that a democracy was a government meant for a moral people.

It is clear that America was built upon a solid foundation of morality and virtue, and that these values continued to run strongly through American society for many years after the nation won her independence. When the revolutionaries founded the nation upon the Constitution and the freedoms that accompanied it, they knew that the democracy would only work if the American people held onto moral values. These values remained strong in America during the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the popularity of the Manifest Destiny doctrine, the moral arguments of the Civil War, and outside observations such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Although the influence of morality in American society ebbed and flowed slightly throughout America's early existence, values remained the foundation upon which the unprecedented liberty of the United States was built and flourished. The morality provided the restraints which held in check the people's personal freedoms, largely keeping them from using their freedom in ways that were destructive to society. It provided the self-governance that allowed the American people to live under a minimally restrictive government, possessing enough civic virtue to make decisions that were beneficial to their society in the long term rather than only satisfying their immediate desires. As

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Saunders and Otley, 1835).

long as this moral foundation remained in place, America's democratic freedom would be able to withstand threats that it would face from both outside forces and from within.

The Postmodern Threat

The biggest threat to America's democratic society and minimalistic government today is not a political revolution or a foreign force. It is a worldview that seeks to undermine the foundation upon which America established her liberty. In the age of the Enlightenment when America was born, a "Modern" worldview reigned.⁶⁰ Modernism was the belief in Enlightenment ideas such as reason, science, objectivity, and absolutes. In a Modernist's world, there was absolute truth, which could be revealed to man through reason and science. The human mind and personal experiences were subject to universal truths and could not change them, only discover them. This view is demonstrated by two of the most significant documents of the era, America's *Declaration of Independence*, and France's *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen*. Both of these documents allude to self-evident and inalienable rights that need not be justified and cannot be taken away. John Locke wrote that the equality of man and man's right of life, liberty, and property were inherent rights that were unveiled through reason. "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."⁶¹ Here he explains that natural law, which governs mankind and his societies, gives these rights to man, and that reason is the teacher that reveals this truth. In this Modern mindset, man's mind does not actually come up with anything new, but simply discovers an absolute truth; truth is not dependent on humans. Morality was also a revealed absolute truth in Modernism. Just like with the rights of life, liberty, and property,

⁶⁰ To avoid confusion, whenever the term "Modern" is used in this paper to refer to the worldview of the Modern Age, it will be capitalized. If the term appears uncapitalized, it should be read in the more general sense, meaning "Of or relating to present times."

⁶¹ John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (Constitution.org, 1690), <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtreat.htm>.

man's mind did not have anything to do with the creation of these moral values, it only discovered them. That truth and morality were absolute and revealed to man rather than being based in man's mind was critical. This aspect of Modernism gave early American society stability.

In the last half of the twentieth century, Modernism began to be replaced by its predecessor which was creatively titled "Postmodernism."⁶² Rather than stressing universal truths that are revealed through reason and rational thought, Postmodernism largely rejects absolutes in favor of subjectivity and personal experience.⁶³ Postmodernism in its entirety is much too large a subject to be examined in full in this paper, but its most significant aspect related to American society—its influence on morality—will be discussed.

With Postmodernism's general rejection of absolutes in favor of subjectivity comes the rejection of objective morality. If there are no absolute truths, there is no basis on which to declare absolute right and wrong. Postmodernism sets forth moral relativism, a subjective morality that declares every man's right and wrong to be based on his own personal convictions. In Postmodernism, instead of absolute moral values existing that man discovers through reason, man creates his own moral values. This results in varying standards for right and wrong for different people rather than an absolute moral standard. In America, Postmodern moral relativism has not been radically embraced in full; there are still actions that are considered by the overwhelming majority to be universal wrong, such as murder and rape. However, when asked questions the answers of which reveal one's beliefs about absolutes and morality, the majority of people are found to hold a Postmodern worldview to some extent. Sociologist

⁶² Some scholars date the beginning of Postmodernism to around the 1950s and 1960s, while some date its birth to the 1980s. The specific time when this worldview came about is outside the scope of this paper, which only seeks to examine the current influence of Postmodernism and like philosophies on American society.

Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/Postmodernism/>>.

⁶³ "Modernism Vs. Postmodernism" (University of Idaho), accessed September 23, 2013, http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/Lecture%20Notes/modernism_vs_Postmodernism.htm.

Christian Smith did a study of young adults across America focusing on morality and found overwhelming existence of moral relativism in their responses. Smith found that most of the respondents believed that moral choices were “a matter of personal taste” and that when speaking of morality the respondents based their beliefs of right and wrong on how they felt, not on a common moral ground.⁶⁴ Columnist David Brooks succinctly summarizes the transition from Modern morality to Postmodern morality: “morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, but now it is thought of as something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart.”⁶⁵

The increased acceptance of moral relativism has opened the doors for the moral acceptance of many things that have long been considered immoral. Sex outside of marriage, for example, has generally been regarded as wrong in Western societies for centuries. However, in the past few decades, as morality is increasingly being based on personal choices, an inconsistent morality concerning sexuality has arisen. Some people still believe that extramarital sex is wrong, some people believe that it is permissible as long as the two involved are in a loving committed relationship, and some people believe that any sex with anyone is okay as long as both parties consent. Since moral standards are based on individual convictions instead of an external moral authority, the standards are inconsistent. This inconsistency has begun to spread to areas that one might think are clear-cut. For instance, everyone admits murder is wrong, but what about abortion? Some people believe abortion is murder and therefore wrong, while others believe it is not murder and should be permissible. Moral relativism and the resulting moral inconsistency has taken seemingly black and white issues such as this one and turned them into gray areas. Although the general moral principles surrounding these issues are universally clear, the details of them become gray as the absolute moral foundation beneath them is eroded.

⁶⁴ Jim Eckerman, *Postmodern Morality Among Today's Young Adults*, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip/2011/10/11-10-08-2/>.

⁶⁵ David Brooks, “Postmodern Morality Among Today's Young Adults” (Grace University, October 8, 2013), <http://graceuniversity.edu/iip/2011/10/11-10-08-2/>.

The results of a Postmodern morally relative democratic society can be easily predicted. If people are left to decide what is right out of their own hearts, the stability of common moral conviction will disappear. Rather than submitting to moral laws laid down by a higher authority and revealed to man, men will be left to follow their heart's desires. The prophet Jeremiah wrote that the heart of man was "desperately wicked."⁶⁶ This Biblical belief is not limited to Christians: Benjamin Franklin thought that religion was critical in keeping society in order as well, due to the inherent evil nature of man. He wrote to a colleague, asking, "If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion what would they be if without it?"⁶⁷ Without religion or the moral standards that come with religious convictions, society would deteriorate into moral chaos. Gospel writer Mark declares that out of man's heart come murder, adultery, theft, perjury, etc., and this is the kind of immorality that can be expected when men are left to base their morality on their own personal feelings.⁶⁸ The short example at the beginning of this paper from *The Stranger* is fictional but still relevant to the discussion. Camus explores the world of a man without absolute morals and the result for this man is murder. In Merseault's world, although he expressed no remorse for his actions, not believing that they were necessarily wrong, the court presiding over his trial declared his actions to be wrong, upholding a moral standard. The prosecutor referred to "moral principles that govern men's hearts," and the "virtue of justice."⁶⁹ If that society, including the court, had been fully morally relativistic, the concepts of moral principles and virtues would have been subjective and the prosecutor could not have declared that Merseault's actions were wrong according to such values. This is the fate of a fully Postmodern society. If morality is based in each individual's own heart, no one person can claim that any action taken by another is wrong. How can one proclaim that his or her morals are more

⁶⁶ Jer. 17:9 NLT

⁶⁷ Benjamin Franklin, "Letter from Ben Franklin to an Atheist" (beliefnet), accessed September 27, 2013, http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/42/Letter_from_Benjamin_Franklin_to_an_Atheist_1.html.

⁶⁸ Mark 15:19

⁶⁹ Camus, 101

right than another person's? Not every person who subscribed to a Postmodern morally relativistic worldview would commit murder like Merseault, but the instability that would result from a fully Postmodern society would be chaotic. Again, Franklin asks, "If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion [and the resulting absolute morality] what would they be if without it?"⁷⁰

As previously discussed, free societies need morality to act as a guidance and a governance for their citizens. The founding fathers were emphatic about this need, and later scholars supported their views and proposed what would happen to a democracy if this morality was degraded or lost. Furthermore, the instability of man has been demonstrated earlier by the comparison between the French and American Revolutions. While both were similar in cause and goal, the principles upon which they based their goals were different: the Americans based their goal of liberty and a free society on an absolute truth from a higher authority revealed to them through reason. This gave them stability even in changes in leadership and through difficulties. The French, on the other hand, based the same goal of liberty and a free society on reasons grounded in the mind of man, throwing out the notion of higher authority. Reason based in man's mind was their authority, and this resulted in chaotic instability and changes in goals and execution of those goals with each change in leadership of the Revolution. Man's mind is unstable and inconsistent from person to person, so anything based on it will mirror those characteristics. When the two aforementioned principles—democracy's need for morality and the instability of man's mind—are taken together, it is clear that Postmodernism, which seeks to base morality in the mind of man, is incompatible with a democracy.

These principles and the resulting claim are broad and may sound lofty and academic when read abstractly, but the implications of them become concrete when they are applied to

⁷⁰ Franklin, interjection mine.

America. When the idea of America was in its fledgling stages, the men in support of it were insistent upon the fact that their plan for a new nation that would offer a radical freedom to its citizens would only work if those citizens would govern themselves sufficiently with morality. Looking across American history shows that this need for an absolute morality was fulfilled in America. Americans were not perfect—the spiritual and moral pulse of America ebbed and flowed throughout different seasons of America’s history, and at times the nation did not at all appear to be the beacon on a hill that many meant for it to be—but overall, American society remained grounded in the moral roots upon which she was founded. Americans, both Christian and nonChristian, accepted that truth and morality came from an absolute source and that it was revealed to them but did not originate within them. This Modern worldview caused Americans to submit to moral standards and thrive in civic virtue that fostered America’s rapid growth and unprecedented national success. In recent decades, however, the threat of Postmodernism and relative morality has increased as Americans are progressively trading a Modern worldview and its absolute morals for Postmodernism’s subjectivism. This transition is proclaimed to be progress because it throws off the supposedly restrictive boundaries of revealed morality and opens people up to the freedom of personal morality. For this reason it is pushed in academia and popular culture, which is resulting in America’s younger generations subscribing to Postmodernism either actively or unknowingly. This transition is not progress though. Freedom from moral restraints sounds appealing, but if a society is to remain healthy, its citizens must be restrained by one method or another. If a society wants to offer liberty to its citizens and not restrain them by governmental power, those citizens must take on this restraint themselves by governing themselves and living with civic virtue. As Herfried Münkler explained, they must sacrifice personal desires willingly for the health of their community. If this is not done willingly by the people, that society will either devolve into chaos and instability, with its citizens acting

with no moral restraint like Merseault in Camus's *The Stranger*, or it will transform into a tyranny with the moral restraints being mandated by the government. Neither of these results is progressive, but one or the other is inevitable if America continues its trek into Postmodernism.

Free societies need absolute morality to survive. Although many claim that freedom from absolutes and morality is progressive, this is a dangerous idea. A historical examination of America reveals that the country was founded with the presumption that the morality of her citizens would persist for the duration of the nation. Although it was not written into America's Constitution, the founding fathers intended for morality to be the foundation of their new nation and declared that her future depended on the persistence of an absolute morality. It is precisely the fact that morality was left out of the laws of the nation that requires America's citizens' to maintain an absolute morality and civic virtue on their own. America's founders designed a system of government that offered unprecedented freedom to its citizens. One aspect of this freedom was that the government did not dictate morality to its citizens. Following Charles Finney's principles of national government and self-government, this system of democracy in America required a high level of self-government from Americans. Modernism and its revealed absolute morality delivered this; Postmodernism and its moral relativism destroys it. Repeating the words of America's father, "It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."⁷¹ America is such a government, and Postmodernism seeks to dismantle her foundational virtue and morality that Washington declared necessary for his new nation's survival. If Washington were alive today, he would surely follow this claim with another: that Postmodernism is incompatible with America's popular government and free society.

⁷¹ Washington.

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