

The Classical Christian Tradition

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Among the most subversive aspects of the Enlightenment Project is its insistence on the radical incompatibility of Christianity with the Classical and Germanic traditions. In his Regensburg Address (2006), Pope Benedict correctly insisted that Europe was created by the uniting of the Classical and the Biblical, a process culminating in the conversion of the Germans. As with Classical and Christian, the influencing was a two-way street, described well by James C. Russell as *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (1994). German art portrayed gentle Jesus, meek and mild, as a warrior chief. Jesus' lordship was interpreted in the light of German tradition, as we find it in Tacitus's *Germania*.

On the field of battle it is a disgrace for a chief to be surpassed in valor by his followers and for the followers not to equal the valor of their chief. To leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means livelong infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance.



Tacitus's description is confirmed by the great Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Battle of Maldon* (14). The English chief allows marauding Vikings to land so that the ensuing battle will be more glorious. After he is slain, a few cowards ride away to everlasting shame, but most of his followers fight to the death in the hopeless but glorious struggle. German converts re-interpreted spreading the faith as following the lord Jesus into battle and understood martyrdom as the German virtue of preferring death to deserting their liege.

Despite the humorous title, David Gless in *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents* (1998) makes a powerful case for the validity of a grand narrative informed by the notion that what is distinctive and vital in the West derives from the assimilation and mutual interaction of Classical, Christian, and German. When great periods of creativity and freedom appear in Europe and America, they are often associated with those who value the three traditions, not as inassimilable entities, but as containing complementary elements which are essential for human fulfillment and societal greatness.

All three traditions were formative and creative in the High Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the American Founding. When Dante writes about his political ideas in *Monarchia*, for instance, he describes an empire that is Roman, Christian, and German. Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) described the Classical, Christian and German (or Common Law) traditions behind the American Revolution (though he also began the bad habit of privileging one tradition over the others, in his case, English Whig thought.) As Carl Richard noticed in *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (1994),

To the founders, there was but one worthy tradition, the tradition of liberty, and they would not have understood the modern historian's need to distinguish between the classical and Whig traditions and to measure the influence of one against the other.

Thomas Jefferson first came to the attention of his fellow Virginians in 1774 by his essay *A Summary View of the Rights of British North America*. He based his argument on the fact that the ancestors of the

British Americans had twice exercised a “right which nature has given to all men,” that is, emigrating from one land to a new one: the first time when the Anglo-Saxons followed Hengist and Horsa to Britain, the second time the English colonization of North America. The colonists’ position is often explained as a defense of their claim to the rights of Englishmen and this argument does play an important role in the debate. In “A Summary View,” however, Jefferson stakes out a claim to the colonists’ rights not only as Englishmen but as *Germans*.

The Germanic origin of the English tickled the funny bone of Benjamin Franklin, who composed a bogus *Edict from the King of Prussia* in 1773, in which Frederick the Great of Prussia makes the same demands on the English that Parliament was making on the colonies. Jefferson took the idea seriously. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress appointed Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin “to a committee to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.” Jefferson’s suggestion is reported by John Adams:

Mr. Jefferson proposed, the children of Israel in the wilderness led by a cloud by day, and a pillar by night and on the other side, Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon chiefs, from who we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed.

Jefferson’s suggested seal was devoted to two groups of settlers, the Chosen People of the Bible and the colonists’ German ancestors. For him the American nation was based on the Bible and the German tradition. As Gilbert Chinard wrote, in 1776 “Jefferson’s great ambition was to promote a renaissance of Anglo-Saxon primitive institutions on the new continent.” This was no youthful whim. Jefferson always insisted on and was eventually successful in ensuring that Anglo-Saxon be taught at the University of Virginia. “This is the true foundation of Jefferson’s political philosophy,” Chinard concluded. “No greater mistake could be made than to look for his sources in Locke, Montesquieu, or Rousseau. Jeffersonian democracy was born under the sign of Hengist and Horsa, not of the Goddess Reason.”

The Founders were traditionalists in law, religion, and politics, and they believed in the coherence of the Christian, Classical, and German traditions, supporting and enriching one another. The

congregationalism of their Protestant church polity supported the federalism of their secular politics and both were strengthened by the idea of “checks and balances” they derived from ancient history, like Polybius’s account of the Roman Republic. And their idea of a citizen as a farmer-soldier-citizen drew on Greek, Roman and German traditions.

The results of the Germanization of medieval Christianity continued to live in popular as well as learned religious life. When I was a boy, Protestant congregations still sang “Onward Christian Soldiers” to music composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. (Sabine Baring-Gould composed the words.) Today almost every Protestant hymnbook has re-written the words of “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, Ye Soldiers of the Cross” to eliminate lines that breathed the spirit of Tacitus Germans and the Anglo-Saxons of *The Battle of Maldon*:

*Ye that are men now serve Him against unnumbered foes.
Let courage rise with danger and strength to strength oppose.*

That popular hymn presented Jesus as the warrior king He was for the first German converts.

Those days are gone, of course. Today almost every appearance of the words “man” and “men” has been erased from hymnals. This recent phenomenon is an assault not only on masculinity but also on the Christian, Classical, and Germanic traditions. The American way of life can be restored only by a return to the traditions that shaped it. Many forces oppose that restoration, but, as the old hymn used to remind us, men do not retreat before unnumbered foes, whether they stand among the troops of Gideon in the Book of Judges or the Three Hundred Spartans at Thermopylae or on the walls of the Alamo. As Bismarck said of his Germans, “We fear God, but nothing else in the world!”

