



French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) believed that democracy was a Christian ideal.

ica and on the Iberian Peninsula” and believed that Catholic citizens’ deepest loyalties lay with the Vatican. (Memorably, this was a big issue for Catholic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960.) Yet in the latter half of the 20th century, Christian Democratic parties (generally Catholic-based) informed by “select doctrinal values” but respectful of the church-state divide flourished in Western Europe and to an extent in Latin America. Couldn’t Islam chart a similar course?

Many in the West object that this analogy is false. Some argue that European Catholics only embraced democracy on orders from the Vatican—and Muslims have no similar central institution. Others hold that the character of Christian Democratic ideas wasn’t any more instrumental in Catholics’ eventual political integration than a “specifically Muslim style of democracy” might be, because it is “the structure of democratic inclusion, not the distinctive ideas that inform it, that leads to moderation.”

Don’t be so fast to dismiss the Catholic parallel, says Müller. First, Europe’s newly formed Christian Democratic parties were hardly puppets of the Vatican, which often did not approve of their creation, control their leadership, or condone their left-veering programs. The Vatican endorsed democracy “only after decades of Christian Democratic practice.”

Instead, Müller argues, Christian doctrine did indeed inspire Catholicism’s turn toward democracy. The ideas of French philosopher Jacques Maritain provide one good example. Beginning in the 1930s, he developed an array of arguments that embraced democracy and human rights as Christian ideals. Though Christian Democracy’s “astounding electoral successes” owed a lot to its firm anticommunist stance and other factors, they were aided by an ideology that tacked between believers’ spiritual values and nonbelievers’ need for “assurance that religiously inspired parties would not abandon state neutrality in religious affairs once in power.”

Whether such a path is available to Islam is an open question, Müller concedes. What the Catholic example *does* show is that “the formation of some liberalized Islam by self-consciously moderate and democratic Muslim intellectuals should not be seen as a sideshow.” Debates among Muslims about the role of sharia in state law and the thinking of such polarizing figures as scholar Tariq Ramadan may cause alarm, but they are important for developing a hospitable foundation for democracy. And in entering

the push-and-pull democratic arena, Muslim parties will inevitably be forced to adapt religious precepts and traditions, Müller argues, a fact that “blanket condemnations of Islam as incompatible with democracy overlook.”

#### RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## Writing Rights

**THE SOURCE:** “Rights, Words, and Laws” by Amartya Sen, in *The New Republic*, Oct. 28, 2010.

WHAT ARE RIGHTS AND WHERE do they come from? Behind the word “rights” are two distinct concepts: a moral and political call to action in the absence of a legal right (i.e., a right to fight for suffrage where none exists) and a right created by law, such as the right to vote. The two ideas are certainly related, but the line from natural rights to legal ones may not be at all direct, observes Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen.

Public recognition of a right often leads to legal recognition, but laws are not the only avenue for establishing rights. Organizations such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross help advance the cause of human rights (such as a right to health care) simply by doing their work. And there are certain cases in which rights can be better established through social criticism and public debate than by statute. For example, law is not the best way to protect a woman’s right to have a voice in family decisions.

Within the legal sphere of rights, laws do not necessarily need to be changed in order for new rights to be

legally recognized. Recognition can come through judicial interpretation. It's "hard not to be an 'originalist' in some sense" when interpreting the Constitution, Sen says, but even that leaves a lot open to discussion about "what exactly of the original enterprise needs to be preserved": the specific language used or the "constitutional motivation." Interpreting the Constitution in light of the motivations at its core—the Framers' vision of a system that would "make room for people with divergent interests and values to live together"—Sen argues, is a more compelling method for keeping it modern.

Surprisingly, adhering to a strict textual interpretation of the Constitution does not proscribe some accommodation to modern ideas. Over time language evolves, and some of the words of the Founders today mean something quite different than they did in 1787. As a result, even a strictly textual reading will change over time. Though the evolution of words and our ideas about human rights may not correspond exactly, it's important to acknowledge that judges who embrace originalism are not just machines but interpreters of words, which, as Samuel Johnson put it, "are but the signs of ideas."

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

## A Jewish Revival

**THE SOURCE:** "The American Jewish Revival of *Musar*" by Geoffrey Claussen, in *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2010.

OVER THE LAST DECADE, A small, obscure movement has made inroads into non-Orthodox

American Jewish culture. *Musar* began in Lithuania in the 19th century as a reaction to the extremely scholarly, text-focused Jewish culture that dominated. (The Hebrew word *musar* can be loosely translated as "morality.") Led by Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810–83), proponents argued that text study alone does not lead to greater moral character. Instead, adherents must engage in frequent and rigorous introspection and develop practices to address their character flaws. In certain important ways, the revival of *musar* today is, like the

*Musar*, a rigorous Jewish ethical practice from Lithuania, is gaining adherents in America.

impulse behind its Lithuanian predecessor, countercultural, rejecting the prominent American feel-good ethos of self-esteem coddlers. But, argues Jewish Theological Seminary doctoral candidate Geoffrey Claussen, "there are ways in which the revival of the *musar* movement is encouraged by strong trends in Jewish culture and in the broader American culture."

The practice of *musar* is no walk in the park. It calls for "introspective meditation and journaling, conversations about one's moral situation that elicit critical feedback, chanting and visualization exercises that engage the emotions, a deep commitment

to the ethical and ritual requirements of Jewish law, and engaging in acts of kindness beyond what the law requires." The work is highly individualized. It aims to foster the virtues of "love, justice, compassion, generosity, reverence, faith, humility, equanimity, and patience."

Salanter's hopes for a mass movement were never realized in Lithuania. Traditionalists rejected his methods in favor of more intellectually driven moral education, and liberals were turned off by *musar's* piety, favoring more Western approaches to morality. The would-be movement more or less died out when a large portion of its followers were killed in the Holocaust. Some of those who survived emigrated to America, but few continued to teach the practice. One prominent American rabbi is said to have thought that Americans were not equipped to handle the enormous work that *musar* requires.

Strangely, this movement is now flourishing in America, and particularly among non-Orthodox Jews. Though *musar's* rigor and intensity certainly don't appeal to everyone, some of its elements are a good fit for American Jews. Studies have shown that Americans prefer solitary meditation to group worship. Jews—often alienated by impersonal synagogue services, an ancient liturgy, and prayers in a foreign language—are no exception. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of *musar* is that it speaks a universal language, asking Jews to become more ethical people, not just "better Jews."