

Winter History & Heritage -- #4 (Jan. 13)

“Right Governments” --- (Kirk; *Roots of American Order*, pp. 86-96)

This categorical title was used by Aristotle (384--322 BC) for the three ideal forms of government: *monarchy*, *aristocracy*, and *commonwealth*? *Monarchy*, wrote the philosopher, is the rule of a righteous one who respects tradition, the limits of the law, and whatever is properly due to the various social classes and interests. An *aristocracy* is ruled by men of high birth whose honor code is “noblesse oblige”; while a *commonwealth* is guided by a virtuous majority mindful of justice even for minorities.

“Wrong Governments” --- (Kirk; *Roots of American Order*, pp. 86-96)

This title may be used for Aristotle’s three deviations from the three governmental ideals, deviations so common as to call often for mixed government or polity? *Tyranny*, wrote the philosopher, is degenerate monarchy in which one man assumes power unlawfully and runs roughshod over traditions and classes with his own willful agenda. *Oligarchy* or degenerate aristocracy allows the few to enrich themselves at the expense of the many, while *democracy* (degenerate commonwealth) does the opposite.

Polis (City-State) --- (Kirk; *Roots of American Order*, pp. 86-96)

This autonomous political entity, humanely limited in size and stubbornly local in loyalties, dominated Greek civilization for centuries before Alexander’s conquests? Nearly a world unto itself in religion, morality, culture, commerce, and politics, its preservation as the locus of human flourishing was a chief concern of Plato and Aristotle. However, it did not survive imperial domination by Macedonia, Asia, and Rome, the loss of its independence marking the end of “the glory that was Greece.”

Civil Religion --- (R. Gamble; “Gettysburg Gospel,” *The American Conservative*)

This term may be used to describe the public adoption of the trappings of traditional religion by the state or politically ambitious men to advance their own ends? One may discern its presence in Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*, in which the wartime president wraps the ideals of equality, liberty, and democracy in unmistakably biblical language. Thus exalted as America’s sacred creed and “cause,” the ideals served to bind the people to the nation-state and both people and state to an ongoing “unfinished work.”

Theodore Parker --- (Gamble; “Gettysburg Gospel,” *The American Conservative*)

This MA Unitarian clergyman (1810-1860) was among the “Secret Six” supporters of the abolitionist terror of John Brown? His philosophic-theological idealism was admired by Lincoln, as evidenced by its undeniable imprint on the president’s message and style in the *Gettysburg Address*. In “The Effect of Slavery on the American People” (1850), the clergyman called attention to a multifaceted “American idea” and defined democracy as “a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people...”

(sources for the summaries are indicated; any errors of judgment belong to Mr. Zaffini, Veritas history teacher and writer of this post for his students & families)