

Article

Unifying Themes in the *Oeuvre* of John M. Headley

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Abstract: The great variety of historical figures and themes found in the published works of John Headley since 1963 reveal a unity of themes and values. The numerous persons whom Headley studied all envisioned a humane universal order even as they moved from theoretical reflection to actual political implementation. His more recent work holds up the European legacy of human rights, democracy, and freedom that have become a Western gift and challenge to non-Western cultures.

Keywords: Headley; Europeanization; empire; Renaissance humanism; cartography; Spanish Empire; globalization

Voltaire famously pronounced that history is nothing but a pack of tricks that we play upon the dead. In this essay, I propose an historical interpretation of the work of John Headley, so you might say I am playing a pack of tricks on the living—but lest you misunderstand my intent, John, I wish you a hearty “*Vivas, floreas, crescas.*” So let us begin with a little riddle: what do an English Chancellor and an Imperial Chancellor have in common? Or, what do the reformer Luther and the counter-reformer archbishop of Milan have in common? The answer, of course, is that John Headley published books on all of them . . . and more.

Yet John once fretted to me that he feared his work showed a dilettante’s restlessness: he worried that he had moved from one subject to another without consistent focus. His comment marked a rare lapse in an otherwise judicious mind, for John’s work shows a deep unity of theme and of moral values. I’ll grant him the wide focus of a life spent in archives in Barcelona, Besançon, Brussels, Madrid, Naples, Rome, Seville, Turin, Vienna, and more, not to mention in this country the Houghton, Beinecke, John Carter Brown, Folger, Newberry, Huntington and other libraries. I’ll also grant that stunning array of figures cross the title pages of his works: Martin Luther, Thomas More, Mercurino

Gattinara, Carlo Borromeo, Tommaso Campanella, as well as the great, often anonymous cartographers of the early modern age. Yet despite all their ostensible diversity, they point in unison to themes and values which not only sustained John's scholarly energy for over half a century but which, as he has argued over this last decade, sustained the best of our civilization for over half a millennium.

For these individuals all shared a commitment to the aspirations to a universal order which they envisioned as humane and universal, whether under the aegis of church or of empire. Whether John studied transgressors against established power like Luther and Campanella, or conservators of an emerging new order like Gattinara and Borromeo, or someone in between the two like More, they all embodied that struggle at the core of European civilization for (as John phrased it) "a symbiosis between the particular and the general, the local and the universal" ([1], p. 12).

In each of their lives, John held up for us the bedeviling dialectical relationship between Utopian visions and political realities—between, if you will, eloquence and efficacy. For as eloquent as all of them were in articulating a theoretical vision of universal order, each of them (except Campanella) crossed the threshold out from the study and into the council chamber to carry his vision into the rough and tumble of swiftly changing political realities. In that dialectic between thought and action, these individuals still command our admiration, as John wrote, for "their prodigious work habits and their sensitive humanist minds" ([1], p. 142). They all shared a common inheritance of medieval legal or theological training that was undergoing a fresh invigoration by the Renaissance humanist re-thinking of spiritual, ecclesiastical, and political realities.

As these men of ideas became men of power, they carried with them what John calls "the continuing human urge to transcend the local [community] for a more inclusive [*i.e.*, universalizing] order" ([2], p. vii) into a world that was collapsing into religious fragments while at the same time expanding into global empires. Again and again, John's work chronicled how the intractable realities of the English court, the Imperial chancery, the archdiocese of Milan, the Lutheran princes, or the Spanish empire would force these learned statesmen to settle for modified success. In addition, each of them was constrained to come to terms with the perennial struggle between church and state. Indeed, as John once declared, "The continuing effort to distinguish the two jurisdictions [church and state] without their actual separation, to renegotiate this distinction between the sacred and the secular, becomes perhaps the most decisive feature of Western civilization" ([2], p. viii). Indeed, John epitomized European civilization when he wrote that, "The interlocking universalisms advanced first by the Stoic notion of cosmopolis on the one hand, [then later] reinforced by the re-presentation of Christ's Body on the other, serve to inform the universalizing claims of each type of polity [*i.e.*, church and state] in their ... permutations throughout the classical/Christian development" ([2], p. vii) of European history. Thus it is no wonder that John revitalized our appreciation also of Campanella, who "reverted to an extreme statement of universal papal theocracy" ([2], p. vi). For, as John has frequently explained, that effort to distinguish church and state would become in later centuries the all-out struggle between a sacral world view and secularization ([2], p. vii). As he would come to insist in his later work, that universalism laid the groundwork for Europe's highest contribution to world civilization.

In the midst of these themes, from the mid-1980s on, John's work turned again and again to Spain and the theme of global Empire. Some of his most incisive review essays are about books on empire and imperialism that appeared in these decades [3–7]. Spain's rapid acquisition of a truly worldwide dominion and its dynastic link to the Holy Roman Empire made its pursuit of universal order not

simply a Utopian dream but a concrete bureaucratic priority. Then, as the years unfolded, John began unfolding maps, real ones conserved at the Folger, the Newberry, the John Carter Brown, and elsewhere. For, as he would emphasize, maps enshrine both practically and symbolically a vision of world order. Indeed, those early modern maps dramatize the dialectic between world order and practical political realities.

Headley's interest in cartography took wings as it carried him to his recent book of 2008 [8]. The title of that book—*The Europeanization of the World: On the Origins of Human Rights and Democracy*—took me and others aback: the habitually reserved, buttoned-down John Headley imbued his latest work with an outspokenly political edge and message. John Headley, of all people, became *engagé*. His object in that book was to reaffirm “the uniqueness of the Western tradition in the creation of a common humanity” ([8], p. 217) beginning with “the Renaissance [which] decisively ... prepared the global context for the European engagement of the world's peoples” ([8], p. 1). For “deep within the recesses of the Western tradition,” he descried “a universalizing impulse ... that surpasses its chief rivals, Islam and China. The West demolished barriers to define geography and peoples as well as [to create] intercontinental traffic, [and the] commerce to make a global community a necessity ([2], p. x). In this amazing book, John identified two European developments as Europe's definitive gifts to the age of globalization, namely, first, “the idea of a common humanity as a single moral, biological totality.... with its program of natural, human rights” ([8], p. 2, phrase in re-arranged sequence) and second “the capacity for self-criticism and dissent [with its inherent idea of freedom]... which through a long historical process ultimately culminated in constitutional democracy ... including ... a free press, independent judicial review, and respect for the rule of law and the rights of minorities” ([8], pp. 2–3, phrase in re-arranged sequence).

John is aware of the deeper, somewhat darker dialectic of that European legacy, or as he calls it, the paradox. He wrote, “Admittedly, much in that [European] tradition did need criticism and reformulation” ([8], p. 5). He cited Diderot's observation of Europe, “the paradox [whereby] the most arrogant of civilizations is at the same time the most radically given to criticism of itself” ([8], p. 4). Amplifying on Diderot, John wrote that “this paradox is trumped by another, even more astonishing—that the civilization that in its colonialism and imperialism gave us the most savage, inhuman treatments of indigenous populations, not to mention the ultimate inhumanity of Auschwitz, was the same that promoted the idea of a common humanity and programs of human rights accompanied subsequently by a myriad of private organizations that continue to address poverty, hunger, disease, and multifarious needs throughout the globe” ([8], p. 4). To the extent that that these latter benefits are true, the “principle for the universal integration of all human populations is the true European legacy” ([5], p. 887; [6], p. 887).

And yet, how close has the world come to that universal integration? Even as John praised the European, or Western,¹ legacy of human rights, democracy, and freedom to dissent, he sounds the *qui vive*,² the alarm at the threats to their viability, not least in the United States in the first decade of this century. In the 1990s he sounded notes of hopefulness, such as when he wrote “A more truly universal

¹ On the distinct usages of European or Western, see [5], ch. 2, esp. pp. 63–102, and fn. 1, p. 227.

² This is but one of the memorable and beloved phrases wherewith the learned Professor Headley sprinkles his conversations.

inclusive secular reading of earth's peoples in some viable political community still awaits [us]" ([2], p. x). The hopefulness then turned, however, to a pervasive anxiety in the decade just ended, as seen especially in his frankly gloomy essay in *Hedgehog Review* that followed the book on Europeanization [9].

With the 2008 book on Europeanization, we might say that, at the pinnacle of his years John Headley himself has entered the company of the Utopian thinkers like More, Luther, and Campanella whom he so ably chronicled. He strains, he hopes, he exhorts, he coaxes his readers, as did they theirs, to hasten forward toward that brighter horizon of universal human rights within our grasp. Thus, the legacy of Utopian humanism revives itself in a moving, transmuted form in John Headley's latest works. So I would close by adapting for John Headley words taken from W. H. Auden's poem on William Butler Yeats:

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of [warfare] bark
And the living nations wait
Each sequestered in its hate.

Follow, [scholar], follow right
To the bottom of the night
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice . . .

In the deserts of the heart,
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise ([10], p. 249).³

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³ Paraphrased for this celebration and addressed to Prof. Headley; paraphrased words are indicated by brackets. The original words were, in order, "Europe" and "poet".

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Select Bibliography of Works by John M. Headley

All books authored or edited by John M. Headley are found here. The articles are those supplied to the present author by Prof. Headley; others may exist. Only major book reviews relating to the subject of this essay are included. Since Headley is the author of all these works, the use of his name below is superfluous. For clarity, works are separated by category. An asterisk marks works mentioned in this essay.

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1. *Luther's View of Church History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963.
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- *10. *Empire, Church, and World: The Quest for Universal Order, 1520-1640*. Aldershot UK: Variorum/Ashgate, 1997.
11. *Confessionalization in Europe, 1550-1700: Essays in Honor and Memory of Bodo Nischan*. Aldershot UK and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2004.

Articles Included in #10 above

This Variorum edition contained Headley's selection of what he considered his principal essays up to 1997. Given their importance in the author's own judgment, they are listed separately here as well as sequentially in the following lists of his essays. Here I give the Roman numeral used for their order in the volume, the title, and the year of their original publication, and their subsequent number in the list of his essays that follows this. The Variorum edition preserves the original pagination of all articles.

12. I. "Thomas More and Luther's Revolt." 1969 (#28 below).
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15. IV. "'Ehe Türckisch als Bäpstisch': Lutheran Reflections on the Problem of Empire 1623-1638." 1987 (#38 below).
16. V. "The Habsburg World Empire and the Revival of Ghibellinism." 1975 (#58 below).
17. VI. "Germany, the Empire and *Monarchia* in the Thought & Policy of Gattinara." 1982/3 (#59 below).
18. VII. "Gattinara, Erasmus, and the Imperial Configurations of Humanism." 1980 (#34 below).
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21. X. "On Reconstructing the Citizenry: Campanella's Criticism of Aristotle's *Politics*." 1991 (#43 below).
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