Can a Christian be a democrat? A (devoted) member of the polis? My answer to this question owes more to the thought of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Yves Simon than to Balthasar, although I doubt it’s inconsistent with Balthasar’s views. The question (I don’t know if this was intentional) suggests Aristotle’s question whether the good man and the “serious” or “zealous” (spoudaios) citizen are the same.\(^1\) Aristotle’s characteristically elliptical treatment begins with the observation that different political regimes take correspondingly different views of virtue--one that seemingly would suggest the obvious superiority of aristocracy, “rule of the best”--and that different virtues must be present in any city, at least the distinctive virtues of rulers and citizens, with rulers having superior virtue. This second point curiously suggests a potentially more positive view of democracy, since there the rulers and citizens are the same. However, all of this is cast into doubt by another suggestion of Aristotle: that the real identity of the good man and the serious citizen is only possible in the “best regime,”\(^2\) the existence of which is beyond any human capacity to simply establish\(^3\), as well as his later suggestion that the best regime is one most in accord with the best way of life (bios).\(^4\) This only deepens the problem, since the two candidates Aristotle considers are the contemplative life and the political life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle straightforwardly holds that the contemplative life is best and calls the political life “second-best”\(^5\), a contrast left discretely unstated in the *Politics*. This points to the tension between the two lives rather than to any resolution of it.
Nevertheless, the very emergence of philosophy as a human possibility is tied to the emergence of the city, the *polis*, and thus of politics. Aristotle’s twin formulations of man as *political* animal and *rational* animal suggest this, as does his account of the development of the city as a complete human community, one that provides not just for the necessities of life but for good life, involving rational discussion about the just and the unjust, the advantageous and the disadvantageous, good and evil. Once the distinctive human capacity for *logos* emerges, of course, it can be applied to things that transcend human affairs, as it was by the first philosophers living in the *poleis* established on the western coast of Anatolia in the seventh century before Christ. Since, as the late and occasionally unintentionally philosophical former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Tip O’Neill once said, “all politics is local,” and philosophy strives, as Plato said, to comprehend “all time and all being”?, the tension between the two is apparent and famously symbolized in the fate of Socrates at the hands of *democratic* Athens, which brings us back to our question, since I suspect that it was precisely the fate of Socrates that Aristotle had in mind in formulating his question about the relationship between the completely good man and the zealous citizen.

Can a Christian be a democrat? A (devoted) member of the *polis*? What is really meant here by “democrat”? Democracy in the classical sense meant rule by the people, the *demos*, and practically that meant the poor. Concretely it meant a set of identifiable institutions and practices that included universal qualification for political office among citizens, the selection of public officials by lot, minimal or no property qualifications as a prerequisite for citizenship, short terms of office for officials, and the dominance of the assembly of all citizens in the making of important decisions. This is radical, direct,
participatory democracy, and it exists nowhere in the modern world. “Democracy” in the modern sense generally refers to governments broadly representative and limited by law with guarantees of basic rights for citizens who are considered, from a political perspective, as equals. When Tocqueville took America to represent the coming democratic revolution he contrasted it to aristocracy, not in Aristotle’s sense, but understood as a political form based on institutionalized inequality between citizens. “Democracy” for Tocqueville really meant something more like modernity, and here too I suspect that is what is meant. I take “democrat” to mean citizen of a modern political society. But that raises another problem.

Why is the term polis in the question? The Greek polis was a small political community, small enough that some classical historians understand it by reference to the modern anthropological category of a “face-to-face society.” Aristotle is quite explicit that a good polis cannot be too large. A polis that is too large cannot be ordered by good laws, cannot effectively mold the characters of citizens, cannot properly deliberate, and is difficult to defend from attacks. Indeed, Aristotle states that ordering too large a polis is the work of a god and not a human being. The polis is a political community commensurate to the natural sensory capacities of a human being. It is not surprising, then, that the rulers of the great empires of antiquity inevitably claimed for themselves divinity. The modern state is very difficult from the polis and is only a real possibility on the basis of what an ancient man might regard as god-like power, that supplied by modern science, which emerged out of the early modern philosophy of nature that took as its point of departure the rejection of Aristotelian natural philosophy.
The aim of the *polis* was said by Aristotle to be the common good or common advantage of the citizens. That notion of the common good passed into medieval Christian political theology as the central regulative ideal for politics, as the final cause of human association. A good citizen, Aquinas held, formally wills the common good. So a revised version of our question might be this: Can a Christian be a good citizen of a modern state? Can one will the common good in a modern state? The question seems to suggest its own answer: why would one not will the common good? Some recent Christian political thinkers have suggested that the notion of the common good is inconsistent with the political realities of the modern state. I have in mind especially Alasdair MacIntyre, but also in somewhat different respects John Finnis and Stanley Hauerwas. All find the association of the common good and the modern state problematic. Here I will only consider MacIntyre’s view.

MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian account of the virtues ties their cultivation to engagement in “practices,” defined memorably in *After Virtue* as any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. While that work includes harsh criticisms of liberalism and concludes with a quasi-apocalyptic comparison of modern society to the late Roman empire and a call to abandon this society and creation of new forms of community that support the life of the virtues. More recently MacIntyre has increasingly turned his attention to political philosophy, the central claim of which is that rational claims to authority made by the modern state fail and can only succeed for local communities that aim at the cultivation
of practices and virtue understood by reference to Aristotle’s account. More specifically,
MacIntyre has argued that modern life is characterized not only by the fragmentation of
its moral vocabulary, but also by a corresponding compartmentalization of life reflected
in the very structure of the modern state, described as

a large, complex and often ramshackle set of interlocking institutions, combining none too coherently the ethos of a public utility company with inflated claims to embody ideals of liberty and justice. Politics is the sphere in which the relationship of the state’s subjects to the various facets of the state’s activity is organized, so that the activities of those subjects do not in any fundamental way disrupt or subvert that relationship.\(^{13}\)

This is accomplished in part by the state’s unwillingness to entertain philosophical questions about first principles and a consequent unwillingness to admit questions about ways of life, even when, as is the case, its decisions, far from being neutral, affect critically the viability of some ways of life, as well as the absence from political discourse of adherence to canons of rational inquiry as distinct from merely manipulative rhetoric. The state’s most problematic deficiency is that it provides no opportunity for anything like systematic reasoning about politics and its effect on ways of life each with corresponding conceptions of virtues and the common good.\(^{14}\) Indeed, MacIntyre argues that the modern state has a distinct, but thoroughly inadequate, conception of the common good that is characterized by individualism and a minimal commitment to security and utility. The common good is simply the summing of individual goods, pursuit of which the state claims to make possible.

Against this view MacIntyre suggests a rival Aristotelian-Thomistic view based on his understanding of practices and virtues. It involves reasoned inquiry into particular goods and their relationship to one another by participants in the various practices both
with respect to their own lives and with respect to their common pursuits. Such inquiry and deliberation is intrinsically pedagogical:

Our primary shared and common good is found in that activity of communal learning through which we together become able to order goods, both in our individual lives and in the political society. Such practical learning is a kind of learning that takes place in and through activity, and in and through reflection upon that activity, in the course of both communal and individual deliberation.\(^{15}\)

Such a conception of the common good is unavailable to the modern state with its minimal and utilitarian claims, its lack of substantive agreement about goods, practices, and virtues, and its consequent opacity to rational deliberation. This opens it up to two crucial practical defects: the often-discussed “free-rider” problem and its need for some of its citizens to sacrifice, even unto death, for its maintenance and survival. Such sacrifice is demanded, but cannot be rationally justified absent the kind of common good it necessarily lacks. Thus, being asked to die for the modern state is, MacIntyre memorably writes, like being asked to die for the telephone company.\(^{16}\)

Perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about this last and rhetorically potent claim is the obvious observation that employees of telephone companies do, in fact, die on the job, as do the employees of other public utilities, not to mention policemen, firemen, and members of the armed forces.\(^{17}\) Moreover, I think it’s fair to say that such people don’t think of themselves potentially dying “for the state.” They willingly risk their lives as necessary to providing the goods and services they do provide to the community. To them the “state” is as much an abstraction as it is to most of us. Whatever the state’s deficiencies as a means of organizing the functions it does, it seems unlikely that many people see themselves as dying or being asked to die for it. One can think of the “state” as a kind of instrument without thinking there is no common good as
its final cause. Moreover, the fact that a community lacks agreement on fundamental matters does not automatically prove that there is no common good, any more than lack of agreement about any matter of fact proves that there are no facts of the matter. Disagreement may well mean that what the state as instrument can do is limited in various ways and this, I suggest, would be no surprise to Aristotle or Aquinas, nor would it constitute a reason to deny that the state’s authority cannot be justified by the common good.

Recall the earlier point from Aristotle about the size of the polis and its substantive aims of leading citizens to the good life. In the course of the discussion in book three that follows the discussion of the relationship between the good man and the good citizen, Aristotle distinguishes a city “truly and not verbally so called,” from what he calls an alliance (summache). The latter is a community for the sake of mutual security, exchange, and utility. A true city is aimed at the good life, has magistrates in common and manifests a concern for the character of citizens. The contrast looks very much like MacIntyre’s account of the two rival conceptions of the common good. Should one think of the modern state as an Aristotelian “alliance,” not intelligible by reference to the common good and thus the source of unjustified and unjustifiable authority?

This conclusion would, I think, be rejected by Thomas Aquinas. I cannot go into the matter in the kind of detail needed here, but I think two aspects of Aquinas’s political theology are important here. In his discussion of whether or not some men should be allowed to exercise authority over others in the prima pars of the Summa theologiae, Aquinas writes that such authority is justified by the necessity of directing and
coordinating the actions of many wills with a view to the common good. Moreover, the main instrumentality of such coordination is law, which Aquinas famously defines as “an ordinance of reason directed to the common good by those who have the care of the community and promulgated.” However, Aquinas’s view of law is less ambitious than that of Aristotle. He repeatedly stresses the limited aims of law, writing that they must be framed “for a number of human, the majority of whom are not perfect in virtue,” that it neither commands all virtues nor forbids all vices, but “only the more grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained; thus the human law prohibits murder, theft, and such like.” This suggests that the larger the society, the thinner must be the conception of the common good and the ambitions of law. I suspect that this thinning out—not elimination—of the notion of the common good and the aims of the political authority is a function of two things: the increasing size and complexity of the political societies that eclipsed the Greek polis and that are the ancestor of the modern state, but also the eclipse of the political community itself as guardian of man’s highest good. The rise of Christianity meant that the city could no longer constitute the moral and spiritual horizon for man. That returns us to where we began.

The tension that existed between the two paradigmatic ways of life, the contemplative and the political, was left unresolved in Aristotle’s most immediately political work, but resolved in favor of the contemplative life in the Nicomachean Ethics. The background to both discussions is, I suggested, the life and death of Socrates, and the thought of Plato, for whom the same tension was treated in the Republic. The claims of
the Gospel transcend both classical ideals in such a way as to recontextualize them. But
since grace does not destroy nature, but rather perfects it, I see no reason why a Christian
cannot formally will the common good of modern societies, even as directed by the state,
so long as its limited, spiritual, moral, and even physical possibilities, are acknowledged.

Draft: 14 April 2005

1 Politics 3.4.1276b16-17.
2 Politics 3.18.1288a38-39
3 Politics, 1260b29-29, 1265a17-18, 1288b21-27, 1295a25-29, 1325b35-39, 1327a3-4, 1330a25-26, 37,
1331b18-23, 1332a28-31.
4 Politics 1323a14-16.
5 Nicomachean Ethics 1178a9-10; cf. 1177b4-26.
6 Politics 1253a1-18.
7 Republic 486a.
8 Alexis de Tocqueville, De la démocratie en Amerique. See especially the introduction to vol. 1.
10 Politics 7.4, 1326a8-b24.
11 I refer to the interpretation of Aquinas’s view here found in Yves R. Simon, Philosophy of Democratic
13 “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” in The MacIntyre Reader, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre
Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 236.
14 Ibid., 238-39.
15 Ibid., 243.
16 See “Poetry as Political Philosophy: Notes on Burke and Yates,” in On Modern Poetry: Essays Presented
to Donald Davie, ed. V. Bell and L. Lerner (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1988), 149; “A Partial
Response to My Critics,” in After MacIntyre, ed. J. Horton and S. Mendus (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre
Dame Press, 1994), 303; “Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,” 236.
17 According the the federal Center for Disease Control the number of occupational deaths in the
transportation/communications/public utilities sector of the workforce between 1980 and 1997 was 17,489.
http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5016a4.htm.
18 Politics 3.9.1280a25-1281a11.
19 Summa theologiae, 1a, 96.
20 STh, 1a2ae, 90.4.
21 STh, 1a2ae, 96.2.
Poverty is not a static condition which people may be rescued from or “raised out of. Poverty has as many guises as the words that describe it. As western governments never cease to affirm, poverty is relative. Perhaps the most astonishing obstacle to the removal of poverty from the world has been the transformation of the super-rich. These have ceased to be regarded as the greedy devourers of the substance of the poor, the ugly monopolists of resources: no longer the exploiters and bloodsuckers of 19th-century industrial lore, they have been turned into philanthropists, the virtuous possessors of fabulous fortunes, by whose grace and charity alone the dire poverty of the destitute will be relieved. As such the common good is at once communal and individual. Still, it does not coincide with the sum total of particular goods and exceeds the goals of inter-individual transactions. Once the idea of community lost its ontological ultimacy (mainly under the impact of nominalist thought), a struggle originated between the traditional conception of the community as an end in itself and that of its function to protect the private interests of its members. Or has the term “liberal” ceased to function as a useful category, since it has come to embrace virtually opposite principles? Capaldi, Nicholas, Out of Order: Affirmative Action and the Crisis of Doctrinaire Liberalism (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), p. 5. 35. Fukuyama, Francis, “The End of History?” National Interest 16 (Summer, 1989): 3. Which state had the earliest example of state police? Which style of policing prefers to ignore or treat informally issues of concern, unless the social or political order of being jeopardized? the Social Agent. Which policing style utilizes the least amount of discretion? Which of the following is not commonly identified as a factor related to police shootings? poverty levels. What U.S. Supreme court case deemed the use of deadly force against an unarmed and non-dangerous fleeing felon an illegal seizure under the Fourth Amendment? Tennessee v. Garner. What U.S. Supreme Court decision set forth the “reasonable officer” standard for police use of deadly force?