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CHARLES TAYLOR

Marianist Award Lecture/1996

A Catholic Modernity?



The University of Dayton

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A CATHOLIC MODERNITY?

by CHARLES TAYLOR

Marianist Award Lecture
1996

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CHARLES TAYLOR is a professor of Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal. He has also taught at other universities in the United States, Germany and France, as well as holding the Chichele Chair for Social and Political Theory at Oxford from 1976-1981.

He is one of the leading theorists of the intellectual movement known as communitarianism and is considered to be among the key thinkers laying the foundation for communitarian thought. Much of his recent work stakes out what he calls a "middle ground" or an "alternative position" between the extremes in today's political and cultural controversies.

Over the decades, Professor Taylor has been involved in Quebec and Canadian politics. He was a candidate for the Federal Parliament on behalf of the New Democratic Party on a number of occasions during the 1960s, and also served on the executive committee of the Party until 1976. He has been actively engaged on the federalist side in the two referenda on Quebec independence, in 1980 and 1995.

An undergraduate of McGill University, Professor Taylor received his M.A. and D. Phil. from Oxford. He returned to McGill in 1961 to teach philosophy and political science. He is married to Alba Romer, an artist, and has five children.



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The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Charles Taylor, January 25, 1996.

A CATHOLIC MODERNITY?

I want to say first how deeply honoured I am to have been chosen as this year's recipient of the Marianist Award. I am very grateful to the University of Dayton, not only for their recognition of my work, but also for this chance to raise today with you some issues which have been at the centre of my concern for decades. They have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them this afternoon, because of the nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it, anyway), which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments. I am very glad of the chance to open out with you some of the questions which surround the notion of a catholic modernity.

I

My title could have been reversed; I could have called this talk: "a modern catholicism?" But such is the force of this adjective 'modern' in our culture, that one might immediately get the sense that the object of my search was a new, better, higher catholicism, meant to replace all those outmoded varieties which clutter up our past. But to search for this would be to chase a chimaera, a monster that cannot exist in the nature of things.

Cannot exist because of what 'catholicism' means, at least to me. So I'll start saying a word about that. "Go ye and teach all nations." How to understand this injunction? The easy way, the one in which it has all too often been taken, has been to take the global world view of us who are Christians, and strive to make over other nations and cultures to fit it. But this violates one of the basic demands of Catholicism. I want to take the original word 'katholou' in two related senses, comprising both universality and wholeness; one might say: universality through wholeness.

Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives. But these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness. But this is the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone, that their complementarity is essential, rather than of beings who come to accept that they are ultimately identical. Or perhaps we might put it: complementarity and identity will both be part of our ultimate oneness. Our great historical temptation has been to forget the complementarity, to go straight for the sameness, making as many people as possible into "good catholics" — and in the process failing of catholicity.

Failing of catholicity, because failing wholeness: unity bought at the price of suppressing something of the diversity in the humanity that God created; unity of the part masquerading as the whole. Universality without wholeness, and so not true catholicism.

This unity-across-difference, as against unity-through-identity, seems the only one possible for us, not only because of the diversity among humans, starting with the difference between men and women, and ramifying outward. It's not just that the human material, with which God's life is to be interwoven, imposes this formula, as a kind of second-best solution to sameness. Nor is it just because any unity between humans and God would have to be one across (immense) difference. But it seems that the life of God itself, understood as trinitarian, is already a oneness of this kind. Human diversity is part of the way in which we are made in the image of God.

So a Catholic principle, if I can put it in this perhaps over-rigid way, is: no widening of the faith without an increase in the variety of devotions and spiritualities and liturgical forms and responses to Incarnation. This is a demand which we in the Catholic Church have often failed to respect, but which we have also often tried to

live up to — I'm thinking, for instance, of the great Jesuit missions in China and India at the beginning of the modern era.

The advantage of us moderns is that, living in the wake of so many varied forms of Christian life, we have this vast field of spiritualities already there before us with which to compensate for our own narrowness, to remind us of all that we need to complement our own partiality, on our road to wholeness. Which is why I'm chary of the possible resonance of "a modern catholicism," with the potential echoes of triumphalism and self-sufficiency residing in the adjective (added to those which have often enough resided in the noun!)

The point is not to be a "modern catholic," if by this we (perhaps semi-consciously and surreptitiously) begin to see ourselves as the ultimate "compleat catholics," summing up and going beyond our less advantaged ancestors¹ (a powerful connotation which hangs over the word 'modern' in much contemporary use). The point rather is, taking our modern civilization for another of those great cultural forms which have come and gone in human history, to see what it means to be a Christian here, to find our authentic voice in the eventual catholic chorus; to try to do for our time and place what Mateo Ricci was striving to do four centuries ago in China.

I realize how strange, even outlandish, it seems to take Mateo Ricci and the great Jesuit experiment in China as our model here.

¹This is not to say that we cannot claim in certain areas to have gained certain insights and settled certain questions which still troubled our ancestors. For instance, we are able to see the Inquisition clearly for the unevangelical horror that it was. But this doesn't exclude our having lot to learn from earlier ages as well, even from people who also made the mistake of supporting the Inquisition.

It seems impossible to take this kind of stance towards our time; and that for two opposite reasons. First, we are too close to it. This is still, in many respects, a Christian civilization; at least, it is a society with many churchgoers. How can we start from the outsider's standpoint which was inevitably Ricci's?

But immediately we say this, we are reminded of all those facets of modern thought and culture which strive to define Christian faith as the other, as what needs to be overcome and set firmly in the past, if Enlightenment, Liberalism, humanism is to flourish. With this in mind, it's not hard to feel an outsider. But just for this reason, the Ricci project can seem totally inappropriate. He faced another civilization, one built largely in ignorance of the Judaeo-Christian revelation; so the question could arise how to adapt this latter to these new addressees. But to see modernity under its non-Christian aspect is generally to see it as anti-Christian, as deliberately excluding the Christian kerygma. And how can you adapt your message to its negation?

So the Ricci project in relation to our own time looks strange for two seemingly incompatible reasons. On one hand, we feel already at home here, in this civilization which has issued from Christendom, so what do we need to strive further to understand? On the other hand, whatever is foreign to Christianity seems to involve a rejection of it, so how can we envisage accommodating? Put in other terms, the Ricci project involves the difficult task of making new discriminations: what in the culture represents a valid human difference, and what is incompatible with Christian faith? The celebrated debate about the Chinese rites turned on this issue. But it seems that for modernity, things are already neatly sorted out: whatever is in continuity with our past is legitimate Christian culture, and the novel, secularist twist to things is simply incompatible. No further enquiry seems necessary.

Now I think that this double reaction, which we are easily

tempted to go along with, is quite wrong. The view I'd like to defend, if I can put it in a nutshell, is that in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the Gospel, of an Incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God which negates the Gospel. The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken, or could have been taken within Christendom. In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development.

For instance, modern Liberal political culture is characterized by an affirmation of universal human rights — to life, freedom, citizenship, self-realization — which are seen as radically unconditional. That is, they are not dependent on such things as gender, cultural belonging, civilizational development, or religious allegiance, which always limited them in the past. As long as we were living within the terms of “Christendom,” that is, of a civilization where the structures, institutions and culture were all supposed to reflect the Christian nature of the society (even in the non-denominational form in which this was understood in the early USA), we could never have attained this radical unconditionality. It is difficult for a “Christian” society, in this sense, to accept full equality of rights for atheists, or people of a quite alien religion, or those who violate what seems to be the Christian moral code (e.g., homosexuals).

This is not because having Christian faith as such makes you narrow or intolerant, as many militant unbelievers say. We have our share of bigots and zealots, to be sure, but we are far from alone in this. The record of certain forms of militant atheism in this century is far from reassuring. No, the impossibility I was arguing for doesn't lie in Christian faith itself, but in the project of Christendom: the attempt to marry the faith with a form of culture

and a mode of society. There is something noble in the attempt; indeed, it is inspired by the very logic of Incarnation I mentioned above, whereby it strives to be interwoven more and more in human life. But as a project to be realized in history, it is ultimately doomed to frustration, even threatens to turn into its opposite.

That's because human society in history inevitably involves coercion (as political society, at least, but also in other ways); it involves the pressure of conformity; it involves inescapably some confiscation of the highest ideals for narrow interests; and a host of other imperfections. There can never be a total fusion of the faith and any particular society; and the attempt to achieve it is dangerous for the faith. Something of this kind has been recognized from the beginning of Christianity in the distinction between Church and State. The various constructions of Christendom since then could be seen unkindly as attempts post-Constantine to bring Christianity closer to the other, prevalent forms of religion, where the sacred was bound up with and supported the political order. A lot more can be said for the project of Christendom than this unfavorable judgement allows. But nevertheless, this project at its best sails very close to the wind, and is in constant danger of turning into a parodic denial of itself.

Thus to say that the fulness of rights culture couldn't have come about under Christendom is not to point to a special weakness of Christian faith. Indeed, the attempt to put some secular philosophy in the place of the faith — Jacobinism, Marxism — has scarcely led to better results (and in some cases, spectacularly worse). This culture has flourished where the casing of Christendom has been broken open, and where no other single philosophy has taken its place, but the public sphere has remained the locus of competing ultimate visions.

I also make no assumption that modern rights culture is perfectly all right as it is. On the contrary, it has lots of problems.

I hope to come to some of these later. But for all its drawbacks, it has produced something quite remarkable: the attempt to call political power to book against a yardstick of fundamental human requirements, universally applied. As the present Pope has amply testified, it is impossible for the Christian conscience not to be moved by this.

This example illustrates the thesis I'm trying to argue here. Somewhere along the line of the last centuries the Christian faith was attacked from within Christendom and dethroned. In some cases, gradually dethroned, without being frontally attacked (largely in Protestant countries); but this displacement also often meant sidelining, rendering the faith irrelevant to great segments of modern life. In other cases, the confrontation was bitter, even violent; the dethroning followed long and vigorous attack (e.g., in France, in Spain, that is, largely in Catholic countries). In neither case is the development particularly comforting for Christian faith. And yet, we have to agree that it was this process which made possible what we now recognize as a great advance in the practical penetration of the Gospel in human life.

Where does this leave us? Well, it's a humbling experience. But also a liberating one. The humbling side: we are reminded by our more aggressive secularist colleagues: "it's lucky that the show is no longer being run by you, card-carrying Christians, or we'd be back with the Inquisition." The liberating side comes when we recognize the truth in this (however exaggerated the formulation), and draw the appropriate conclusions. This kind of freedom, so much the fruit of the Gospel, we only have when nobody (that is, no particular outlook) is running the show. So a vote of thanks to Voltaire and others for (not necessarily wittingly) showing us this, and allowing us to live the Gospel in a purer way, free of that continual and often bloody forcing of conscience which was the sin and blight of all those "Christian" centuries. The Gospel was always meant to stand out, unencumbered by arms. We have now

been able to return a little closer to this ideal — with a little help from our enemies.

Does acknowledging our debt mean that we have to fall silent? Not at all. This freedom, which is prized by so many different people for different reasons, also has its Christian meaning. It is, for instance, the freedom to come to God on one's own; or otherwise put, moved only by the Holy Spirit, whose barely audible voice will often be heard better when the loudspeakers of armed authority are silent.

That is true, but it may well be that Christians will feel reticent about articulating this meaning, lest they be seen as trying to take over again, by giving the (authoritative) meaning. But here they may be doing a disservice to this freedom. And this for a reason which they are far from being alone in seeing, but which they are often more likely to discern than their secularist compatriots.

The very fact that freedom has been well-served by a situation in which no view is in charge, that it has therefore gained from the relatively weakening of Christianity, and from the absence of any other strong, transcendental outlook, can seem to accredit the view that human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether. The development of modern freedom is then identified with the rise of an exclusive humanism, that is, one based exclusively on a notion of human flourishing, which recognizes no valid aim beyond this. The strong sense which continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself, is stamped as an illusion; and judged to be a dangerous illusion, since the peaceful coexistence of people in freedom has already been identified as the fruit of waning transcendental visions.

To a Christian, this outlook seems stifling. Do we really have to pay this price to enjoy modern freedom? A kind of spiritual

lobotomy? Well, no-one can deny that religion generates dangerous passions. But that is far from being the whole story. Exclusive humanism also carries great dangers, which remain very under-explored in modern thought.

II

I want to look at two of these here. In doing so, I will be offering my own interpretation of modern life and sensibilities. All this is very much open to contestation. But we urgently need new perspectives in this domain, as it were, Ricci-readings of modernity.

The first danger that threatens an exclusive humanism, which wipes out the transcendent beyond life, is that it provoke as reaction an immanent negation of life. Let me try to explain this a little better.

I have been speaking of the transcendent as being “beyond life.” In doing this, I am trying to get at something which is not only essential in Christianity, but in a number of other faiths, for instance, in Buddhism. A fundamental idea enters these faiths in very different form, but which one might try to grasp in the claim that life isn’t the whole story.

There is one way to take this expression, which is as meaning something like: life goes on after death, there is a continuation, our life doesn’t totally end in our deaths. I don’t mean to deny what is affirmed on this reading, but I want to take the expression here in a somewhat different (though undoubtedly related) sense.

What I mean is something more like: the point of things isn’t exhausted by life, the fulness of life, even the goodness of life. This is not meant to be just a repudiation of egoism, the idea that the fulness of my life (and perhaps those of people I love) should be

my concern. Let us agree with John Stuart Mill that a full life must involve striving for the benefit of human kind. Then acknowledging the transcendent means seeing a point beyond that.

One form of this is the insight that we can find in suffering and death not merely negation, the undoing of fulness and life, but also a place to affirm something which matters beyond life, on which life itself originally draws. The last clause seems to bring us back into the focus on life. It may be readily understandable even within the purview of an exclusive humanism how one could accept suffering and death in order to give life to others. On a certain view, that too, has been part of the fulness of life. Acknowledging the transcendent involves something more. What matters beyond life doesn't matter just because it sustains life; otherwise it wouldn't be "beyond life" in the meaning of the act. (For Christians, God wills human flourishing, but "thy will be done" doesn't reduce to "let human beings flourish.")

This is the way of putting it which goes most against the grain of contemporary Western civilization. There are other ways of framing it. One which goes back to the very beginning of Christianity is a redefinition of the term "life" to incorporate what I'm calling "beyond life": for instance, the NT evocations of "eternal life," and John 10.10.

Or we could put it in a third way: acknowledging the transcendent means being called to a change of identity. Buddhism gives us an obvious reason to talk this way. The change here is quite radical, from self to "no-self" (anatta). But Christian faith can be seen in the same terms: as calling for a radical decentring of the self, in relation with God. ("Thy will be done.") In the language of Abbé Henri Bremond in his magnificent study of French 17th Century spiritualities,² we can speak of "theocentrism." This way of putting it brings out a similar point to my first way,

²Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris: A. Colin, 1967-68.

since most conceptions of a flourishing life assume a stable identity, the self for whom flourishing can be defined.

So acknowledging the transcendent means aiming beyond life, or opening yourself to a change in identity. But if you do this, where do you stand to human flourishing? There is much division, confusion, uncertainty about this. Historic religions have in fact combined concern for flourishing and transcendence in their normal practice. It has even been the rule that the supreme achievements of those who went beyond life have served to nourish the fulness of life of those who remain on this side of the barrier. Thus prayers at the tombs of martyrs brought long life, health and a whole host of good things for the Christian faithful; and something of the same is true for the tombs of certain saints in Muslim lands; while in Theravada Buddhism, for example, the dedication of monks is turned, through blessings, amulets, etc., to all the ordinary purposes of flourishing among the laity.

Over against this, there have recurrently been “reformers” in all religions who have considered this symbiotic, complementary relation between renunciation and flourishing to be a travesty. They insist on returning religion to its “purity,” and posit the goals of renunciation on their own, as goals for everyone, and disintricated from the pursuit of flourishing. Some are even moved to denigrate the latter pursuit altogether, to declare it unimportant, or an obstacle to sanctity.

But this extreme stance runs athwart a very central thrust in some religions. Christianity and Buddhism will be my examples here. Renouncing, aiming beyond life, not only takes you away, but also brings you back to flourishing. In Christian terms, if renunciation decentres you in relation with God, God’s will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agapê*. In Buddhist terms, Enlightenment doesn’t just turn you from the world, but also opens

the flood-gates of metta (loving kindness) and karuna (compassion). There is the Theravada concept of the Pāccekabuddha, concerned only for his own salvation, but he is ranked below the highest Buddha, who acts for the liberation of all beings.

Thus outside of the stance which accepts the complementary symbiosis of renunciation and flourishing, and beyond the stance of purity, there is a third one, which I could call the stance of agapê/karuna.

Enough has been said to bring out the conflict between modern culture and the transcendent. In fact, a powerful constitutive strand of modern western spirituality is involved in an affirmation of life. It is perhaps evident in the contemporary concern to preserve life, to bring prosperity, to reduce suffering, world-wide, which is I believe without precedent in history.

This arises historically out of what I have called elsewhere³ “the affirmation of ordinary life.” What I was trying to gesture at with this term is the cultural revolution of the early modern period, which dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the citizen life, and put the centre of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production and the family. It belongs to this spiritual outlook that our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity. Concern above all for the “good life” smacked of pride, of self-absorption. And beyond that, it was inherently inegalitarian, since the alleged “higher” activities could only be carried out by an élite minority, whereas leading rightly one’s ordinary life was open to everyone. This is a moral temper to which it seems obvious that our major concern must be our dealings with others, injustice and benevolence; and these dealings must be on a level of equality.

³See *Sources of the Self*, Harvard University Press, 1989, chapter 13!

This affirmation, which constitutes a major component of our modern ethical outlook, was originally inspired by a mode of Christian piety. It exalted practical agapê, and was polemically directed against the pride, élitism, one might say, self-absorption of those who believed in “higher” activities or spiritualities.

Consider the Reformers attack on the supposedly “higher” vocations of the monastic life. These were meant to mark out élite paths of superior dedication, but were in fact deviations into pride and self-delusion. The really holy life for the Christian was within ordinary life itself, living in work and household in a Christian and worshipful manner.

There was an earthly, one might say, earthy critique of the allegedly “higher” here which was then transposed, and used as a secular critique of Christianity, and indeed, religion in general. Something of the same rhetorical stance adopted by Reformers against monks and nuns is taken up by secularists and unbelievers against Christian faith itself. This allegedly scorns the real, sensual, earthly human good for some purely imaginary higher end, the pursuit of which can only lead to the frustration of the real, earthly good, to suffering, mortification, repression, etc. The motivations of those who espouse this “higher” path are thus, indeed, suspect. Pride, élitism, the desire to dominate play a part in this story too, along with fear and timidity (also present in the earlier Reformers’ story, but less prominent).

In this critique, of course, religion is identified with the second, purist stance above; or else with a combination of this and the first “symbiotic” (usually labelled “superstitious”) stance. The third, the stance of agapê/karuna, becomes invisible. That is because a transformed variant of it has in fact been assumed by the secularist critic.

Now one musn’t exaggerate. This outlook on religion is far from being universal in our society. One might think that this is

particularly true in the US, with the high rates here of religious belief and practice. And yet, I want to claim that this whole way of understanding things has penetrated far deeper and wider than simply card-carrying, village-atheist style secularists, that it also shapes the outlook of many people who see themselves as believers.

What do I mean by "this way of understanding?" Well, it is a climate of thought, a horizon of assumptions, more than a doctrine. That means that there will be some distortion in the attempt to lay it out in a set of propositions. But I'm going to do that anyway, because there is no other way of characterizing it that I know.

If it were spelled out in propositions, it would read something like this: (a) that for us life, flourishing, driving back the frontiers of death and suffering are of supreme value; (b) that this wasn't always so; it wasn't so for our ancestors, and for people in other, earlier civilizations; (c) that one of things which stopped it being so in the past was precisely a sense, inculcated by religion, that there were "higher" goals; (d) that we have arrived at (a) by a critique and overcoming of (this kind of) religion.

We live in something analogous to a post-revolutionary climate. Revolutions generate the sense that they have won a great victory, and identify the adversary in the previous régime. A post-revolutionary climate is one which is extremely sensitive to anything which smacks of the ancien régime, and sees backsliding even in relatively innocent concessions to generalized human preferences. Thus Puritans who saw the return of Popery in any rituals, or Bolsheviki who compulsively addressed people as "Comrade," proscribing the ordinary appellation "Mister."

I would argue that a milder, but very pervasive version of this kind of climate is widespread in our culture. To speak of aiming

beyond life is to appear to undermine the supreme concern with life of our humanitarian, "civilized" world. It is to try to reverse the revolution, and bring back the bad old order of priorities, in which life and happiness could be sacrificed on the altars of renunciation. Hence even believers are often induced to redefine their faith in such a way as not to challenge the primacy of life.

My claim is that this climate, often unaccompanied by any formulated awareness of the underlying reasons, pervades our culture. It emerges, for instance, in the widespread inability to give any human meaning to suffering and death, other than as dangers and enemies to be avoided or combatted. This inability is not just the failing of certain individuals; it is entrenched in many of our institutions and practices, for instance the practice of medicine, which has great trouble understanding its own limits, or conceiving some natural term to human life.⁴

What gets lost, as always, in this post-revolutionary climate is the crucial nuance. Challenging the primacy can mean two things. It can mean trying to displace the saving of life and the avoidance of suffering from their rank as central concerns of policy. Or it can also mean making the claim, or at least opening the way for the insight, that more than life matters. These two are evidently not the same. It is not even true, as people might plausibly believe, that they are causally linked, in the sense that making the second challenge "softens us up," and makes the first challenge easier. Indeed, I want to claim (and did in the concluding chapter of *Sources*) that the reverse is the case: that clinging to the primacy of life in the second (let's call this the "metaphysical") sense is making it harder for us to affirm it wholeheartedly in the first (or practical sense).

⁴Cf. Daniel Callahan, *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995.

But I don't want to pursue this claim right now. I return to it below. The thesis I'm presenting here is that it is in virtue of its "post-revolutionary climate" that western modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent. This, of course, runs contrary to the mainline Enlightenment story, according to which religion has become less credible thanks to the advance of science. There is, of course, something in this, but it isn't in my view the main story. More, to the extent that it is true, that is, that people interpret science and religion as at loggerheads, it is often because of an already felt incompatibility at the moral level. It is this deeper level that I have been trying to explore here.

In other words, to oversimplify again, the obstacles to belief in Western modernity are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic. I am talking about the driving force here, rather than what is said in justification of unbelief in arguments.

III

But I am in danger of wandering from the main line of my argument. I have been painting a portrait of our age in order to be able to suggest that exclusive humanism has provoked, as it were, a revolt from within. But before I do this, let us pause to notice how in the secularist affirmation of ordinary life, just as with the positing of universal and unconditional rights, an undeniable prolongation of the Gospel has been perplexingly linked with a denial of transcendence.

We live in an extraordinary moral culture, measured against the norm of human history, in which suffering and death, through famine, flood, earthquake, pestilence or war, can awaken worldwide movements of sympathy and practical solidarity. Granted, of course, that this is made possible by modern media and modes of transportation, not to speak of surpluses. These shouldn't blind us

to the importance of the cultural-moral change. The same media and means of transport don't awaken the same response everywhere; it is disproportionately strong in ex-Latin Christendom.

Let us grant also the distortions produced by media hype and the media-gazer's short attention span, the way dramatic pictures produce the strongest response, often relegating even more needy cases to a zone of neglect from which only the cameras of CNN can rescue them. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is remarkable, and for the Christian conscience inspiring. The age of Hiroshima and Auschwitz has also produced Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières.

The Christian roots of all this run deep. First, there is the extraordinary missionary effort of the Counter-reformation Church, taken up later by the Protestant denominations. Then there were the mass-mobilization campaigns of the early nineteenth Century—the anti-slavery movement in England, largely inspired and led by Evangelicals; the parallel abolitionist movement in this country, also largely Christian inspired. Then this habit of mobilizing for the redress of injustice and the relief of suffering worldwide becomes part of our political culture. Somewhere along the road, this culture ceases to be simply Christian-inspired — although people of deep Christian faith continue to be important in today's movements. Moreover, it needed this breach with the culture of Christendom, as I argued above in connection with human rights, for the impulse of solidarity to transcend the frontier of Christendom itself.

So we see a phenomenon, of which the Christian conscience cannot but say “flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone;” and which is paradoxically often seen by some of its most dedicated carriers as conditional on a denial of the transcendent. We return again to the point our argument was at some time ago, in which the

Christian conscience experiences a mixture of humility and unease. The humility in realizing that the break with Christendom was necessary for this great extension of Gospel-inspired action; the unease in the sense that the denial of transcendence places this action under threat.

Which bring us back to the main line of the argument. One such threat is what I am calling the immanent revolt. Of course this is not something that can be demonstrated beyond doubt to those who don't see it. And yet, from another perspective, it is just terribly obvious. I am going to offer a perspectival reading; and in the end we have to ask ourselves which perspective makes the most sense of human life.

Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond. More, as though it weren't a crying need of the human heart to open that window, and first gaze, then go beyond. As though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world-view, bad conditioning, or worse, some pathology. Two radically different perspectives on the human condition. Who is right?

Well, who can make more sense of the life all of us are living? If we are right, then human beings have an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life. Denying this stifles. But then, even for those who accept the metaphysical primacy of life, this outlook will itself seem imprisoning.

Now there is a feature of modern culture which fits this perspective. This is the revolt from within unbelief, as it were, against the primacy of life. Not now in the name of something beyond, but really more just from a sense of being confined, diminished by the acknowledgment of this primacy. This has been an important stream in our culture, something woven into the inspiration of poets, and writers; for example, Baudelaire (but was

he entirely an unbeliever?) and Mallarmé. But the most influential proponent of this kind of view is undoubtedly Nietzsche. And it is significant that the most important anti-humanist thinkers of our time: e.g., Foucault, Derrida, behind them, Bataille, all draw heavily on Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, of course, rebelled against the idea that our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering. He rejects this both metaphysically and practically. He rejects the egalitarianism underlying this whole affirmation of ordinary life. But his rebellion is in a sense also internal. Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion, and indeed does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation.

So this move remains within the modern affirmation of life in a sense. There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestations, what makes it something you can say “yes” to.

A religion of life which would proscribe death-dealing, the infliction of suffering, is confining and demeaning. Nietzsche thinks of himself as having taken up some of the legacy of pre-Platonic and pre-Christian warrior ethics, their exaltation of courage, greatness, élite excellence. Modern life-affirming humanism breeds pusillanimity. This accusation frequently recurs in the culture of counter-Enlightenment.

Of course, one of the fruits of this counter-culture was Fascism — to which Nietzsche’s influence was not entirely foreign, however true and valid is Walter Kaufman’s refutation of the

simple myth of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi. But in spite of this, the fascination with death and violence recurs, e.g., in the interest in Bataille, shared by Derrida and Foucault. James Miller's book on Foucault shows the depths of this rebellion against "humanism," as a stifling, confining space one has to break out of.⁵

My point here is not to score off neo-Nietzscheanism, as some kind of antechamber to Fascism. A secular humanist might want to do this. But my perspective is rather different. I see these connections as another manifestation of our (human) inability to be content simply with an affirmation of life.

The Nietzschean understanding of enhanced life, which can fully affirm itself, also in a sense takes us beyond life; and in this it is analogous with other, religious notions of enhanced life (like the NT's "eternal life"). But it takes us beyond by incorporating a fascination with the negation of life, with death and suffering. It doesn't acknowledge some supreme good beyond life, and in that sense sees itself rightly as utterly antithetical to religion.

I am tempted to speculate further, and to suggest that the perennial human susceptibility to be fascinated by death and violence, is at base a manifestation of our nature as homo religiosus. From the point of view of someone who acknowledges transcendence, it is one of the places this aspiration beyond most easily goes when it fails to take us there. This doesn't mean that religion and violence are simply alternatives. On the contrary, it has meant that most historical religion has been deeply intricately with violence, from human sacrifice down to inter-communal massacres. Because most historical religion remains only very imperfectly oriented to the beyond. The religious affinities of the cult of violence in its different forms are indeed palpable.

⁵James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

What it might mean, however, is that the only way fully to escape the draw towards violence lies somewhere in the turn to transcendence, that is, through the full-hearted love of some good beyond life. A thesis of this kind has been put forward by René Girard, for whose work I have a great deal of sympathy, although I don't agree on the centrality he gives to the scapegoat phenomenon.⁶

On the perspective I'm developing here, no position can be set aside as simply devoid of insight. We could think of modern culture as the scene of a three-cornered — perhaps ultimately, a four-cornered — battle. There are secular humanists, there are neo-Nietzscheans, and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life. Any pair can gang up against the third on some important issue. Neo-Nietzscheans and secular humanists together condemn religion and reject any good beyond life. But neo-Nietzscheans and acknowledgers of transcendence are together in their absence of surprise at the continued disappointments of secular humanism, together also in the sense that its vision of life lacks a dimension. In a third line-up, secular humanists and believers come together in defending an idea of the human good, against the anti-humanism of Nietzsche's heirs.

A fourth party can be introduced to this field if we take account of the fact that the acknowledgers of transcendence are divided. Some think that the whole move to secular humanism was just a mistake, which needs to be undone. We need to return to an earlier view of things. Others, in which I place myself, think that the practical primacy of life has been a great gain for human kind, and that there is some truth in the "revolutionary" story: this gain was in fact unlikely to come about without some breach with estab-

⁶See René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris: Grasset, 1972; and *Le Bouc Émissaire*, Paris: Grasset, 1982

lished religion. (We might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be too provocative a way of putting it.) But we nevertheless think that the metaphysical primacy of life is wrong, and stifling, and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy.

I have rather complicated the scene in the last paragraphs. Nevertheless, the simple lines sketched earlier still stand out, I believe. Both secular humanists and anti-humanists concur in the “revolutionary” story; that is, they see us as having been liberated from the illusion of a good beyond life, and thus enabled to affirm ourselves. This may take the form of an Enlightenment endorsement of benevolence and justice; or it may be the charter for the full affirmation of the will to power — or “the free play of the signifier,” or the aesthetics of the self, or whatever the current version is. But it remains within the same post-revolutionary climate. For those fully within this climate, transcendence becomes all but invisible.

IV

The above picture of modern culture, seen from one perspective, suggests a way in which the denial of transcendence can put the most valuable gains of modernity in danger, here the primacy of rights and the affirmation of life. This is, I repeat, one perspective among others; the issue is whether it makes more sense of what has been happening over the last two centuries than that of an exclusive, secular humanism. It seems very much to me that it does so.

I want now to take up this danger from another angle. I spoke above about an immanent revolt against the affirmation of life. Nietzsche has become an important figure in the articulation of this, a counter-belief to the modern philanthropy which strives to increase life and relieve suffering. But Nietzsche also articulated

something equally disquieting: an acid account of the sources of this modern philanthropy, of the mainsprings of this compassion and sympathy which powers the impressive enterprises of modern solidarity.

Nietzsche's "genealogy" of modern universalism, of the concern for the relief of suffering, of "pity," will probably not convince anyone who has the highest examples of Christian agapê, or Buddhist karuna, before their eyes. But the question remains very much open, whether this unflattering portrait doesn't capture the possible fate of a culture which has aimed higher than its moral sources can sustain it.

This is the issue I raised very briefly in the last chapter of *Sources*. The more impressed one is with this colossal extension of a Gospel ethic to a universal solidarity, to a concern for human beings on the other side of the globe, whom we shall never meet or need as companions or compatriots; or, because that is not the ultimately difficult challenge, the more impressed we are at the sense of justice we can still feel for people we do have contact with, and tend to dislike or despise; or at a willingness to help people who often seem to be the cause of their own suffering; the more we contemplate all this, the more surprise we can feel at people generating the motivation to engage in these enterprises of solidarity, of international philanthropy, or the modern welfare state. Or to bring out the negative side, the less surprised one is when the motivation to keep them going flags, as we see in the present hardening of feeling against the impoverished and disfavoured in many Western democracies.

We could put the matter this way. Our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before. Never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates. A similar point can be made, if we

look at the other dimension of the affirmation of ordinary life, that concerned with universal justice. Here too, we are asked to maintain standards of equality which cover wider and wider classes of people, bridge more and more kinds of difference, impinge more and more in our lives. How do we manage to do it?

Or perhaps we don't manage all that well; and the interesting and important question might run: how could we manage to do it? But at least to get close to the answer to this, we should ask: how do we do as well as we do, which after all, at first sight seems in these domains of solidarity and justice much better than previous ages?

1. Well, one way is that performance to these standards has become part of what we understand as a decent, civilized human life. We live up to them to the extent we do, because we would be somewhat ashamed of ourselves if we didn't. They have become part of our self-image, our sense of our own worth. And alongside this, we feel a sense of satisfaction and superiority when we contemplate others — our ancestors, or contemporary illiberal societies — who didn't or don't recognize them.

But we sense immediately how fragile this is as a motivation. It makes our philanthropy vulnerable to the shifting fashion of media attention, and the various modes of feel-good hype. We throw ourselves into the cause of the month, raise funds for this famine, petition the government to intervene in that grisly civil war; and then forget all about it next month, when it drops off the CNN screen. A solidarity ultimately driven by the giver's own sense of moral superiority is a whimsical and fickle thing. We are far in fact from the universality and unconditionality which our moral outlook prescribes.

We might envisage getting beyond this by a more exigent sense of our own moral worth; one that would require more consistency,

a certain independence from fashion, careful, informed attention to the real needs. This is part of what people working in NGOs in the field must feel, who correspondingly look down on us TV-image-driven givers, as we do on the lesser breeds who don't respond to this type of campaign at all.

2. But the most exigent, lofty sense of self-worth has limitations. I feel worthy in helping people, in giving without stint. But what is worthy about helping people? It's obvious, as humans they have a certain dignity. My feelings of self-worth connect intellectually and emotionally with my sense of the worth of human beings. Here is where modern secular humanism is tempted to congratulate itself. In replacing the low and demeaning picture of human beings as depraved, inveterate sinners, in articulating the potential of human beings for goodness and greatness, humanism has not only given us the courage to act for reform, but also explains why this philanthropic action is so immensely worthwhile. The higher the human potential, the greater the enterprise of realizing it, the more the carriers of this potential are worthy of our help in achieving it.

But philanthropy and solidarity driven by a lofty humanism, just as that which was driven often by high religious ideals, has a Janus face. On one side, in the abstract, one is inspired to act. But on the other, faced with the immense disappointments of actual human performance, with the myriad ways in which real, concrete human beings fall short of, ignore, parody and betray this magnificent potential, one cannot but experience a growing sense of anger and futility. Are these people really worthy objects of all these efforts? Perhaps in face of all this stupid recalcitrance, it would not be a betrayal of human worth, or one's self-worth, if one abandoned them. Or perhaps the best that can be done for them is to force them to shape up.

Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy — the love of the human — can gradually come to be invested with

contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off, or worse, continues, but invested now with these new feelings, and becomes progressively more coercive and inhumane. The history of despotic socialism, i.e., twentieth century communism, is replete with this tragic turn, brilliantly foreseen by Dostoyevsky over 100 years ago (“Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism”⁷), and then repeated again and again with a fatal regularity, through one-party régimes on a macro level, to a host of “helping” institutions on a micro level from orphanages to boarding schools for aboriginals.

The ultimate stop on the line was reached by Elena Ceaucescu in her last recorded statement before her murder by the successor régime: that the Rumanian people have shown themselves unworthy of the immense untiring efforts of her husband on their behalf.

The tragic irony is that the higher the sense of potential, the more grievously real people fall short, and the more severe the turn-around will be which is inspired by the disappointment. A lofty humanism posits high standards of self-worth, and a magnificent goal to strive towards. It inspires enterprises of great moment. But by this very token it encourages force, despotism, tutelage, ultimately contempt, and a certain ruthlessness is shaping refractory human material. Oddly enough, the same horrors which Enlightenment critique picked up in societies and institutions dominated by religion.

And for the same causes. The difference of belief here is not crucial. Wherever action for high ideals is not tempered, controlled, ultimately engulfed in an unconditional love of the beneficiaries, this ugly dialectic risks repeating itself. And of course, just holding the appropriate religious beliefs is no guarantee that this will be so.

⁷Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Devils*, Trans. David Magarshack, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 404.

3. A third pattern of motivation, which we have seen repeatedly, this time in the register of justice rather than benevolence: We have seen it with Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and today with the politically correct left, as well as the so-called "Christian" right. We fight against injustices which cry out to heaven for vengeance. We are moved by a flaming indignation against these: racism, oppression, sexism, or leftist attacks on the family or Christian faith. This indignation comes to be fuelled by hatred for those who support and connive with these injustices; and this in turn is fed by our sense of superiority that we are not like these instruments and accomplices of evil. Soon we are blinded to the havoc we wreak around us. Our picture of the world has safely located all evil outside of us. The very energy and hatred with which we combat evil proves its exteriority to us. We must never relent, but on the contrary double our energy, vie with each other in indignation and denunciation.

Another tragic irony nests here. The stronger the sense of (often correctly identified) injustice, the more powerfully this pattern can become entrenched. We become centres of hatred, generators of new modes of injustice on a greater scale, but we started with the most exquisite sense of wrong, the greatest passion for justice and equality and peace.

A Buddhist friend of mine from Thailand briefly visited the German Greens. He confessed to utter bewilderment. He thought he understood the goals of the party: peace between human beings, and a stance of respect and friendship by humans towards nature. But what astonished him was all the anger, the tone of denunciation, of hatred towards the established parties. These people didn't seem to see that the first step towards their goal would have to involve stilling the anger and aggression in themselves. He couldn't understand what they were up to.

The blindness is typical of modern exclusive secular human-

ism. This modern humanism prides itself on having released energy for philanthropy and reform; by getting rid of "original sin," of a lowly and demeaning picture of human nature, it encourages us to reach high. Of course, there is some truth in this. But it is also, terribly partial, terribly naive, because it has never faced the questions I have been raising here: what can power this great effort at philanthropic reform? This humanism leaves us with our own high sense of self-worth to keep us from backsliding, a high notion of human worth to inspire us forward, and a flaming indignation against wrong and oppression to energize us. It cannot appreciate how problematic all of these are, how easily they can slide into something trivial, ugly or downright dangerous and destructive.

A Nietzschean genealogist can have a field day here. Nothing gave Nietzsche greater satisfaction than showing how morality or spirituality is really powered by its direct opposite; e.g., that the Christian aspiration to love is really motivated by the hatred of the weak for the strong. Whatever one thinks of this judgement on Christianity, it is clear that modern humanism is full of potential for such disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way. And the higher, the flight, the greater the potential fall.

Perhaps after all, it's safer to have small goals, not too great expectations, be somewhat cynical about human potentiality from the start. This is undoubtedly so, but then one also risks not having the motivation to undertake great acts of solidarity, and combat great injustices. In the end, the question becomes a maximum one: how to have the greatest degree of philanthropic action with the minimum hope in mankind. A figure like Dr. Rieu in Camus' *La Peste* stands as a possible solution to this problem. But that is fiction. What is possible in real life?

I said earlier that just having appropriate beliefs is no solution to these dilemmas. And the transformation of high ideals into brutal practice was demonstrated lavishly in Christendom well before modern humanism came on the scene. So is there a way out?

This cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith. But it is clear that Christian spirituality points to one. It can be described in two ways. Either as a love/compassion which is unconditional, that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself; or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God. They obviously amount to the same thing. In either case, the love is not conditional on the worth realized in you just as an individual, or even in what is realizable in you alone. That's because being made in the image of God, as a feature of each human being, is not something that can be characterized just by reference to this being alone. Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love which is that facet of God's life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity.

Now it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, most value in these times.

Can we try to take stock of the first leg of our strange Ricci-like journey into the present? The trip is obviously not complete. We have just looked at some facets of modernity: the espousal of universal and unconditional rights, the affirmation of life, universal justice and benevolence. Important as these are, there are plainly

others: for instance, freedom; and also the ethic of authenticity,⁸ to mention just two. Nor have I had time to examine other dark features of modernity, such as its drive towards instrumental reason and control. But I think an examination of these other facets would show a similar pattern. So I'd like to try to define this more closely.

In a sense our journey was a flop. Imitating Ricci would involve taking a distance from our time, feeling as strange in it as he was arriving in China. But what we saw as children of Christendom was first, something terribly familiar — certain intimations of the Gospel, carried to unprecedented lengths; and secondly, a flat negation of our faith — exclusive humanism. But still, like Ricci, we were bewildered by this. We had to struggle to make a discernment, as he did. He wanted to distinguish between those things in the new culture which came from the natural knowledge we all have of God, and should be affirmed and extended, on one hand; and those practices which were distortions and would have to be changed on the other. And similarly, we are challenged to a difficult discernment, trying to see what in modern culture reflects its furthering of the Gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.

The point of my Ricci image is that this is not easy. And the best way to try to achieve it is to take at least some relative distance, in history if not in geography. The danger is that we not be sufficiently bewildered, that we think we have it all figured out from the start, and we know what to affirm and what to deny. We then can enter smoothly into the mainstream of a debate which is already going on in our society, about the nature and value of

⁸Which I have discussed in *The Malaise of Modernity*, Toronto: Anansi 1991; American edition: *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, 1992.

modernity. As I have indicated,⁹ this debate tends to become polarized between “boosters” and “knockers,” who either condemn or affirm modernity en bloc, thus missing what is really at stake here, which is how to rescue admirable ideals from sliding into demeaning modes of realization.

From the Christian point of view, the corresponding error is to fall into one of two untenable positions: either we pick certain fruits of modernity, like human rights, and take them on board, but then condemn the whole movement of thought and practice which underly them, in particular the break-out from Christendom (in earlier variants, even the fruits were condemned); or in reaction to this first position, we feel we have to go all the way with the “boosters” of modernity, and become fellow travellers of exclusive humanism.

Better, I would argue, after an initial (and let’s face it, still continuing) bewilderment, gradually to find our voice from within the achievements of modernity; to measure the humbling degree to which some of the most impressive extensions of a Gospel ethic depended on a breakaway from Christendom; and from within these gains try to make clear to ourselves and others the tremendous dangers that arise in them. It is perhaps not an accident that the history of the twentieth century can be read either in a perspective of progress, or in one of mounting horror. Perhaps it is not contingent that it is the century both of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and of Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières. As with Ricci, the Gospel message to this time and society has to respond both to what in it already reflects the life of God, and to the doors which have been closed against this life. And in the end, it is no easier for us than it was for Ricci to discern both correctly, even if for opposite reasons. Between us twentieth-century Catholics, we have our own variants of the Chinese Rites controversy. Let us pray that we do better this time.

⁹See *op. cit.*

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