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## THE NATURE OF SECULARISM AND CHRISTIAN RENEWAL

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*It might well be said in our time that secularism is the root of all evil, and the truth of it consists in man's continual rebellion against God as the key element in a process which has profoundly shaped the modern world. By now, however, the secularization of political, economic, social, intellectual and even religious life in all the institutions of society has become potent enough to condition persons to rebel even if they had not originally been so inclined. Below, Rev. Edward Berbussee, S.J., describes the extent of secularization and suggests, in brief, how one might start to do something about it.*



IN AN ADDRESS TO THE COLLEGE OF CARDINALS ON JUNE 22, 1973, POPE PAUL VI said: "It is only in the Christian message that modern man can find the answer to his questions and the energy for his commitment of human solidarity." This idea, intended for the clergy and faithful of the whole world, as repeated in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, laid stress on the absolute necessity "for us to take into account a heritage of faith that the Church has the duty of preserving in its untouchable purity" (Dec. 8, 1975). In the words of the Pontiff one finds here an absolute commitment to the unchangeable teaching of the Church, a faith given by Christ, preserved as the "sign of contraction" to the errors of the times. This renews the assurance that the Holy Spirit is ever guarding the Church, and strengthening the magisterium in its inerrant teaching. Yet such advice seems odd among the secularist ideas that have captured the media, taken over the universities and schools, and even infiltrated Catholic education. It is my purpose in what follows to analyze the nature and extent of this secularism and to reaffirm Pope Paul's solution to the problem it presents.

Secular humanism centers all truth in man who is its creator and interpreter. It is man without God, Revelation and Church. Personal subjectivity is seen as the ultimate well-spring of reality. One's life-style is of one's own choice, and the meaning of life is of one's own creation. And so it has been said that each individual spends his life dialoguing on the various "values", none of which offers certitude, and ends his life with the belief that others must face the abyss with the same abiding faith in man. This set of values is pre-eminently the message of the media, entering even the home by television, as an ever-revolving prism of relativistic truth.

Another formative medium in modern life captured by secular humanism is that of the legislatures and courts. From a proliferation of contraceptive legislation, the law has recently taken the stance of admitting the individual's right over all faculties of his body. Pre-marital sex, homosexuality, infidelity in marriage, euthanasia and abortion have become acceptable. With the public order in such disarray, the reign of secularism has also become typical of the public schools. There, textbooks are imposed on children in violation of their religious and moral beliefs. An impressive example is that of Kanawha County, West Virginia, where parents find that the teaching and texts provide lessons that ridicule their morality and Bible beliefs. The media, instead of providing a sympathetic expression of their rights

as parents to protest, in great part ridiculed the conscience-convictions of these Fundamentalist Protestants by labelling them fanatical; and the local courts wrote distorted reasonings of the Constitution into decisions against them. Moreover, in *Torcaso v. Watkins*, the Supreme Court of the United States arbitrarily defined the word “religion” in the First Amendment to include such “non-theistic beliefs” as “secular humanism”. The Court itself has effectively protected the State’s teaching of it in the schools. And yet the courts have done nothing to protect the theistic-believing students from secularist indoctrination by the school. Such a student must submit, as a captive person, to the school’s exercise in establishment of non-theistic religion. Though he is free to attend the church of his choice, he is not free to abstain from religious exercise in the classroom.

Other expressions of secular humanism that have been entrenched in the public schools are those of Sidney Simon’s values clarification and Lawrence Kohlberg’s morals education. In the former, such techniques as role playing, peer dialoguing and diary-revelation of personal intimacies have been instruments for classroom indoctrination in secular humanism. The latter uses a trained teacher to lead the student up the ladder to the sixth and highest rung of personal development, that of the “autonomous individual”. Down the ladder, at a fourth level of law and order, is the student who elects to be guided by God’s law revealed in Faith and interpreted by an infallible Church. The modern humanist, holding to a complete autonomy of man, allows for no such religious limitation, because he is atheistic. In a word, his educational philosophy is planned to destroy theistic belief. Some Catholic schools are adopting “values clarification” and “morals evaluation”, apparently unaware of the intrinsic anti-theism in them.

#### THE COLLEGE: SEEDBED OF SECULARIST MYTHS

The university is the most fertile field for the sowing of the myth of man’s self-sufficiency. It quickly begets the new religion of the “secular man”, attempting to reduce Christianity to an historical period in man’s

retarded development. It is determined to divorce Faith from reason. As Eric Voegelin, in *Enlightenment to Revolution*, indicates:

The language of Christianity becomes a ‘myth’ as a consequence of the penetration of our world by a rationalism which destroys the transcendental meaning of symbols taken from the world of senses. In the course of this ‘de-divinization’...of the world, sensual symbols have lost their transparency for transcendental reality: they have become opaque and are no longer revelatory of the immersion of the finite world in the transcendent.

The reasoning man, it is said, cannot find beyond the appearances of things the Divine reality, because it cannot exist. It is because of this error that the secularist would replace Christianity with autonomous man, discarding Faith as folk-lore.

In reviewing the various disciplines in a university which foster faith in an autonomous man, philosophy probably has the principal role, since it tends to condition the study of the arts as well as the physical and social sciences. A belief that man is completely a result of evolutionary forces will affect the research of biologists, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists. Rejection of philosophy as concerned with unchanging, timeless being and truth will influence both the substance and the method of what is taught. If all religion is regarded as experience, the science of theology will be conditioned by a philosophy of man which holds to ever-changing substance and a rejection of absolutes. The only reality then becomes process, evolution. As being changes so does truth. In a word, all is relative to the environment, or the biological nature of the individual.

Consider the impact of such a philosophy-if we can even call it philosophy-on education, especially as we see it exemplified in John Dewey’s “empirical naturalism”. Thought for him is a highly developed form of the active relation between a living organism and its environment. It is purely biological, an experience of environ-



*Pope Paul VI*

ment. His thought is called “empiricist”, because it starts from experience and leads back to experience. The only theory of truth for him is “the hypothesis that works”. It is pragmatic. It becomes the instrument of knowing. To arrive at morality, one must study biological and social psychology. And so customs constitute moral standards. And these change constantly with growth which has no final end, save growth itself. So the individual is conditioned by the existing social environment. Consequently, Dewey’s form of education is not a preparation for life, a formation in eternal truths and fixed moral principles, but a “process of living”. The school becomes a community of “intelligent inquiry”. There are no absolutes in religion, nor in philosophical conclusions. The techniques of modern education are geared to autonomous man, since no one is expected to hold to absolutes derived from either Faith or reason. The only absolute is that all is relative.

This relativistic philosophy of education has been adopted by some Catholic educational institutions. One set of such educators has adopted “technological humanism” as its rationale of education. They inform us that today’s knowledge of man is through technologies; that man is the inductive learner, “creating his own destiny by the force, extent and dynamic of his own knowledge.” He acquires his skills and his data from experience; his reflections will be informed by the physical and social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, genetics, archeology, ethology and psychology. We are, also, warned by such technological humanists that philosophy cannot yield any basic principles of life, nor theology give any dogmatic truths to those of Christian faith. Consequently, the school is unable to convey any systematic understanding of human nature or of its worth through philosophical insight, ethical judgment, or theological reflection.

Since philosophy has been traditionally regarded as the handmaid of theology, providing it with logical principles of reasoning and an insight into man’s nature from reasoned reflection and conscience, it is necessary to see the effect of relativistic philosophy on theological science. Certain present day theologians, instead of looking to Tradition, the Bible and the teaching of the Church as the primary sources of their theologizing, have made the modern world the primary source of their theological conclusions. In 1864 Pope Pius IX exposed and condemned this error as Modernism, a theological reasoning which involved a complexity of heresies. As

Regis Barwig, an expert on Pius IX, summarizes it, the Pontiff denounced:

Pantheism which confused God with nature; materialism which sustained the existence of matter alone; rationalism which recognized human reason alone as the unique and exclusive source of truth; indifferentism which stated that every religion is equally good and true; and, finally, liberalism, as embodied in the atheistic State and an indiscriminate and absolute liberty in matters of worship, teaching and communication. (*Osservatore Romano*, Feb. 16, 1978)

Modernist theologians today subvert or deny every article of the Creed. Some are reverting to the heresies condemned in the early Councils of Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon which, in the 4th and 5th centuries, defined the Son as consubstantial with the Father. Today’s errors again attempt to teach that the Son was adopted by the Father, and is so a creature. In matters of authority, some theologians set up arbitrary models for the Church and find the Catholic Church defective in comparison. In Avery Dulles’ concept of an “open Church” we find a serious departure from the Church’s teaching on its own nature. Since the time of the Apostolic Church with its *sacramentum unitatis* and, even more fully and beautifully in the teachings of the second Vatican Council, the Church is defined as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It has its authentic teaching in those bishops who, as successors of the Apostles, remain in union with the Vicar of Christ, who is Peter’s successor.



In the sensitive area of catechetics, Gabriel Moran has led many priests and religious astray in a teaching that looks more to the current message of the world than to the doctrinal teaching of the Church. Gregory Baum would re-interpret Christianity in such a way that “doctrine is [made] relative to culture and history.” Hans Kueng rejects the Divine Sonship of Jesus, since his interpretation allows only for a Jesus of this world. His secularized Christianity obviously admits no Church as we know it, and denies the magisterium and its infallibility.

Moving into the social sciences, we find that the sociology taught in the modern university carries the

Comtean theory of the ages of man: that of theology now relegated to the realm of myth; that of reason with its discarded metaphysics; and the present age of the positive sciences, which, Comte tells us, bring us the only truth of man-discovered through sociology and psychology. It is in this age that we now live, with a constant process of inquiry into what values are current among men. Thus statistics are meant to be guides to truth, not a revealing of the decay in modern society in the light of objective standards of morality. The failures of a people are not merely charted, but become a means of determining what should be the modern values. We often hear statistics on the Catholic practice of contraceptive birth control. The prophets of the New Christianity assure us that the Pope's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, is not authentic because it is not acceptable to Catholics. This attitude exemplifies the looking to the world for values, and the demand for radical change in Catholic moral teaching. Such a sociology would secularize the Church, to fit in with the Modernist principles of the day.

In anthropology we are told by Franz Boas, its American father, and by Margaret Mead, his disciple, that "human beings depend on accumulated acquisitions due to renewed data and continued readjustment" (Molnar). And so we become products of our culture, in which a new civilization controls all our actions. This "environmentalism" is a school of thought that seeks to remove competitive individuality, in order to allow for the molding of the behavior of men by a new science. The "Good Society" is to result; original sin is absolutely rejected. The Harvard psychologist, B. F. Skinner, tells us that behavior can be consciously formed by scientifically planned actions. He would create a psychological technology by which a particular society will be created. There is to be a continual creation of "new beings" through the manipulation of environment. We would then become the robots of environmental engineers, mechanized integers formed by the computer which will tell us how to think and act. It is the much feared utopia of Orwell and Huxley, a rigidly controlled paradise here on earth.

I have used the word *manipulation* to describe how man can be brought to change by the masters of environment. Consider, for instance, the use of the media in order to attach a negative attitude to the idea of an institutional Church with an infallible teaching authority; and how "charismatic" has come to refer to one with new ideas, or a sense of freedom and progress. Manipulation is a subtle, indirect attack on a man's will or free-

dom. Cardinal Bengsch, Archbishop of Berlin, writing in 1973, exposed the fact that in the Church "certain star theologians have been pushed in the mass media so as to create the current climate of opinion." Using this form of manipulation, they have even attempted to disguise their use of the devious art, by charging the Church with manipulation. The opposite, of course, is true. Christ refused to change His message, making it acceptable to those listeners who desired a political role for the Messiah. He allowed those who would not accept His Eucharistic teaching to part from Him. He and His Church have ever preached a clear, often unpopular teaching, demanding a metanoia, a conversion of heart, a repentance, an acceptance of an unworldly teaching. This has been most manifest in the Papal teaching in *Humanae Vitae*. In evaluation of this misapplication of manipulation, Cardinal Bengsch said:

We have a noisy minority within the Church which lumps together all the actual or presumed mistakes of the Magisterium under the inclusive concept of manipulation and, on the other hand, groups everything it wishes to do under the concept of freedom. This can be described as a classic example of manipulation. (*Osservatore Romano*, May 3, 1973)

He also noted that there is a manipulation used for the construction of a new Church, wherein freedom will prevail over dogma and the teaching of the Magisterium. The structure is to be changed by "control groups", which interpret "conscience decision" as a matter of personal taste, evaluation and even whim. This leads to the "totally liberated" man who becomes a victim of "every current of manipulated public opinion."

As environmentalism seeks to mold the behavior of man through controlling his environment, so the ethologists (a modern term for evolutionists) claim the exclusively animal origin of man. Molnar points out that Briffault in 1927 held for a transfer of a physiological description to a social tradition and culture, while Teilhard de Chardin taught a transfer 'from biological evolution, at a given moment, to moral-intellectual evolution: the biosphere to the noosphere. Both environmentalists and ethologists are in error in so limiting man, who is directed by reason with free and intelligent choices. They propose faulty experiments in the process of arriving at the Superman. The ethologists manipulate man's biological nature, in order to produce a "right evolution"; the environmentalists would make a man a machine, the

product of society—a society that is molded by the Skinner mechanisms. So they speak of a “new man”, as the Marxists speak of a “new collectivity”. Both evils are authoritarian, devoid of God and a transcendent order; both destroy freedom in the name of progress and under the threat of danger to man’s survival. We have seen this most clearly in the ideologues of population control, who would sterilize, contracept and abort human life. They are the physical and social engineers who would control every aspect of our lives, destroy personal freedom and sweep out of consideration any moral and religious reflections. We have arrived at the age that was predicted by Bernanos—an age of “new men” in which there are no inherent values in human nature and no transcendent truths within the grasp of the intellect.

There are many areas in which this theme of “secularism today” could be illustrated. But it is my contention, again, that any in-depth understanding must look first to the philosophical origins. If man is only a product of biological laws which are not always constant, but in continued evolution—or of environmental influences which may be manipulated by the control groups—then it is clear that the reality of God, Church, objective morality, and infallibility in a Magisterium are swept away as historical anachronisms. The “new man” has been sketched on the drawing boards of the positivists who look to the sciences for ever-changing truth. The “New Christianity” becomes a democratic social norm which fluctuates with the changing political and social tides.

## SECULAR HUMANISM: 400 YEARS OF GESTATION

In addition to philosophical analysis, however, one can understand something of the nature and extent of secularism by historical study. This involves a tracing of the gradual advent of secular humanism, briefly suggested as follows. Sixteenth century Protestantism broke the seamless garment of the Church, the Bride of Christ. Doctrine was negated, and authoritative teaching was denied in a personalist interpretation of Scripture; and so the roadway was opened to the autonomous conscience. Religious experience began to assume a disproportionate role in spiritual life, emotionalism was augmented, and subjectivism fattened.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the French and other philosophers reduced all truth to discovery by man’s reason, and Europe’s evolving secularization became vis-

ible. Gallicanism, a form of national conciliarism, was espoused and grew into a form of congregationalism by which the Church’s structure ultimately lost—in certain European countries—its bond of authority in the successor of St. Peter. Soon the Church was subjected to the national monarchy, ridiculed by such as Voltaire, and oppressed by the irreligious *Encyclopedia of Diderot*. All this was later called Liberalism; but its reforms were most illiberal, as is evidenced in the excesses of the French Revolution. Socialism—prepared for by the “General Will” of Rousseau—looked to the social (positive) sciences for its growth. Marx in 1848 carried this form of materialism to its logical conclusion, with radical violence as its instrument. The excesses of two erroneous extremes persist today: laissez-faire capitalism which upholds the rights of the individual to the injury of the exploited individuals in society; and Marxist Socialism which advances the “collectivity” (under the control of a dictatorial party) to the disadvantage of individual freedom. Meanwhile, in the Church, rationalism and positivism sought to undermine the Divine commission given to the successors of Peter and Christ’s other Apostles. The resulting Modernism was most effectively dissected in Pius IX’s *Syllabus* (1864) and St. Pius X’s *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). It has been labelled by the latter Pontiff “the synthesis of all heresies”; and today this composite of errors is virulently alive in the Church, impeding Her in the task of transforming the rampant secularism of the modern world.

## HOPE IN THE LIVING CHURCH OF CHRIST

I have attempted to analyze the pervasive impact of secularism in recent centuries, and the picture often seems bleak. And yet, in untold ways the Holy Spirit is working within the Church, both to renew the lives of the faithful and to draw many who walk in darkness into the Divine Light. Christ lives in His Church through a created personality of union, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is preached to every creature. Authentic evangelization has not been frustrated by Modernist secularism. As in the 4th century St. Athanasius fought the errors of Arianism; as in the 5th century St. Augustine overcame the deviations of the Donatists and Pelagianism; as the Council of Trent corrected the errors of the 16th century; and as in every age of the Church’s history Christ raised up new champions, so other saints will renew the life of the Church. There can be no cause for despair.

In 1968 the Holy Father issued his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, on the right morality in the marital act; it is a rich development in the consistent teaching of the Church. In 1972 the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith issued a Declaration on the true teaching of the Church in respect to the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity. In 1975 the same Congregation issued the Declaration on Sexual Ethics which corrected the multiple moral errors taught by deviant theologians. In 1977 it spoke with profound insight on the errors of those who—contrary to Christ’s institution, the practice of the Fathers of the Church, the consistent tradition and the authoritative teaching of the Church—would insist on the right of women to seek ordination to the priesthood. In that same year, the Holy Father issued an Apostolic Exhortation on proclaiming the Gospel; it attempts to elicit cooperation and zeal in preaching the Word of God to all men.

On the sacraments, on the social doctrine of the Church, there is a rich and developing heritage of teaching. The documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially the ones on the Missions and on the Laity, are prime material for Catholic reflection. They stimulate a positive and fearless conviction of mind, a determined effort of the will and a warm response in heart.

Despite the ravaging of the Church in our day, all these things are so many consoling signs of hope. It has ever been so in the history of the Church. As far back as 1518, St. Thomas More, in exhorting the bishops of England at a time of great crisis, compared the Church

and its travails to the English isle buffeted by the surrounding seas:

Once again, as in the days of Noah, the tide is reaching flood. But the rainbow in the clouds will always shine forth in the end. As the sea shall never surround and overwhelm the land utterly, and yet in its time has eaten many places in, and swallowed whole countries up, and made places all sea now, that one time were fair and well-inhabited land.. .even so, though the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ shall never be totally overwhelmed with heresies, nor the gates of Hell altogether prevail against Christ’s Church, still and all, while in some places it wins a new people, so in others may there by negligence be lost the old. We win, my Lords, and we lose. But in the end we win.

In the struggle of the Church against secular humanism today, the attrition will be great, but it can never be total. Indeed, we need only follow the strategy outlined by Cardinal Bengsch in order to ensure our own survival amid the manipulation of modern secularism. Noting that secularists have often succeeded in making prayer a matter of secondary importance, if not altogether irrelevant, the Cardinal urges contemplation before action and the return of prayer to its proper place. Only then can we reach the Christian maturity necessary to assist in the inevitable renewal of the Church in the travail of time. And only then will we be prepared for the Church’s equally inevitable entry into the eternal nuptials at the end of time.



## SUGGESTED READING

### CHURCH DOCUMENTS

#### **Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith**

Declaration Regarding the Safeguarding of Faith in the Mysteries of the Incarnation and of the Most Blessed Trinity from *Some Recent Errors* (Feb. 21, 1972)

*Persona Humana* (1975)

*Inter Insigniores* (1977)

### PAPAL DOCUMENTS

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Dec. 8, 1975), Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Paul VI

*Propositioes Syllabi*, Pius IX

*Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), Pius XI

*Rerum Novarum* (1891), Leo XIII

VATICAN II

Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*) Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*)

Berbusse, Edward J., S.J., *The Mirage of Technological Humanism* in *The Wanderer*, Oct. 9, 1975.

Dulles, Avery, S.J., *The Models of the Church* (Doubleday, N.Y., 1974). Molnar, Thomas, *Ethology and Environmentalism: Man as Animal and Mechanism* in *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall, 1977.

Montgomery, Marion, *Flannery O'Connor's Voegelinian Dimension* in *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall, 1977.

