

# *The Primacy of Man— Key to Social Order*

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*Rev. James Schall, S.J., who last appeared in F&R III, 1, is widely noted for his incisive commentary on the current socio-politico-economic scene. In the essay which follows, Fr. Schall cuts to the common root of the ideological orientations of today's varied politicians by suggesting that the primacy of the human person must be the starting point for any regeneration of the social order. In line with the social teachings of the Church, and drawing deeply from the Western classical tradition, the author develops his ideas in a combined philosophical and historical manner which presents his insights with startling clarity and force.*

The ethical doctrine rests upon a metaphysical foundation. Why, indeed, does the human person possess the right to realize his happiness, of which no state can deprive him? Metaphysics replies: because human personality alone is a genuine **substantial reality**. On the other hand, any group whatever, the state included, is not a **real** being; it is simply a group of human persons.

—Maurice de Wulf, **Philosophy and Civilization in the Middle Ages**, New York, Dover, 1952, p. 229.

Justice is, in a certain way, greater than man, than the dimensions of his earthly life. Every man lives and dies with a certain sense of insatiability for justice, because the world is not capable of satisfying fully a being created in the image of God.

—John Paul II, General Audience, November 8, 1978.

“The Deity does not regard the human race collectively,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in a remarkable, Platonic-type passage about a century and a half ago in *Democracy in America*. “He surveys at one glance and severally all the beings of whom mankind is composed; and he discerns in each man the resemblances that assimilate him to his fellows, and the differences that distinguish him from them. *God, therefore, stands in no need of general ideas . . .*”(II, 3, 14). The general ideas that mankind does stand in definite need of, however, are precisely those that enable us to see and attend to men and women in their distinctiveness and uniqueness, in their substantial reality, as the medievals called it. In the past few decades, however, Western man has developed new general ideas which work against this goal.

Indeed, our capacity and our moral will to reach each human who needs compassion and help are impeded by the general ideas that have recently dominated our culture. Some years ago, Jacques Maritain wrote a small book entitled *The Person and the Common Good* in which he tried to distinguish “individual” and “person” in order to account for those ways in which a human being was subject to political community and those in which he transcended it. What the general ideas of recent times have made clear, however, is that unless we consider the human person as the principal component of the common good we all share, we shall end up attempting to invent or evolve another kind of a being not displaying any of the deficiencies and defects of the persons who do exist.

## *IDEAS INIMICAL TO MEN*

The general ideas of contemporary public life have more and more forbidden us to believe that the world could meet the requirements of a growing population as the Judaeo-Christian beliefs had held it could. Even our much discussed concentration on human rights has been weakened by a “cultural” interpretation of them which has removed their central value from the individual person. Often we have assumed as axiomatic that a more collectivist world was not merely inevitable as a way to save our environment or our way of living, but even desirable as a way we ought to live. Thus, someone like the late Mao Tse-tung managed to collect the oddest assortment of admirers, cultural and clerical, into his cause, a cause even the Chinese are now beginning to wonder about. “No one starves in China” became a kind of *ultima ratio* of argument, even though the considerably more impressive argument historically would probably be, “No one starves in Tokyo or Taipei or Seoul.” The incredible fact that only one changing official opinion was permitted each day to 800 million Chinese, or various other peoples in the growing rash of late-twentieth century mini-totalitarian regimes, came to be accepted as inevitable “for development.” Political and civil freedom was something peculiar to a few odd northern European states and even fewer of their far-flung former colonies.

In recent years, however, two rather powerful movements are seeing something of a decline as tenable general ideas. The first is the dooms-day ecological school, which still has much vogue. The second, and the more venerable, is socialism, which has been accepted as dogma by many contemporary revolutionaries of a variety of persuasions as the only humane way to think about mankind's corporate existence. "The most important political event of the twentieth century," Irving Kristol has written to the contrary, "is not the crisis of capitalism, but the death of socialism. . . . With the passing of the socialist ideal there is removed from the political horizon the one alternative to capitalism that was rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. . . . Now to an ever greater degree, anti-capitalism is becoming synonymous with one form or another of barbarism and tyranny." The Third World has become a monotonous string of more or less inefficient tyrannies usually with no common cry other than that they call themselves "socialist" and cannot see any way out of their self-chosen predicaments except to suppress liberty further to cover the persistent errors of socialist practices.

The path to a kind of intellectual tyranny via ecology has been, if anything, more frightening in terms of human worth than the path via socialist utopia. In the ecological perspective, the Earth, called so improperly a "spaceship," is overpopulated, polluted, starved, and stripped. Reputations have been made convincing us that we have no future except disaster unless we embrace a set of ideas instinctively held to be tyrannical and inhuman by the standards of a previous Christian ethic. "Can world starvation be prevented by 2000 A.D.? The answer is no," Professor Richard Lee Clinton of Oregon State wrote in the AID journal *War on Hunger*. But this should not deter or discourage us, it seems, even though the Paddocks boldly made that exact same erroneous prediction for twenty-five years earlier in *Famine, 1975!* "Only revolutionary regimes," Professor Clinton continued unabashedly,

can effect the profound structural, attitudinal, and behavioral changes that must take place in practically every one of the poor countries if viable coping mechanisms are to be devised. . . . Our leaders and the American public must come to an understanding that our form of government is ill-suited to the conditions that prevail in most Third World countries; one must let the countries work out their own form of governance without interference. We must recognize that the central aim of our politics — the limitation of power — is precisely the opposite of that of Third World politics, where political systems have to be capable of mobilizing their citizens and marshalling their scarce resources for their most effective use.

And this authoritarian solution, disguised as rational, with its anti-American and anti-democratic presuppositions, is one of the sure guarantees that the Third World will remain sunk in its own problems. Such dooms-day and implicitly totalitarian ideas, I believe, are no longer, if they ever were, practical or necessary to reach even their own stated goals: a world of abundance, a well-cared for Earth, a larger and more adequate population. Rather, this return to classical despotism as a program for "progress" fails to grasp the dynamics of both freedom and development.

The paradox is almost too poignant. By forgetting the truth that there are values and ends that are to be stubbornly insisted upon in the name of what men are and of what cannot be done to them we have witnessed a whole generation opting for ideas and systems we formerly had no scruple in condemning as evil in our traditional political ethic when they appeared in their pure form. We have lived in a generation in which a host of revolutionary and religious leaders have told us we must embrace radical "new" structures in society, structures which turn out on examination to be quite old aberrations, often productive of quite inhuman conditions. We have seen Paul Ehrlich, Garrett Hardin, Barry Commoner, the Club of Rome, and their zealous followers convert thousands of quite bookish academics and uncritical laity to the most dangerous positions, positions that Norman Macrae acutely labeled in *The Economist* as old nineteenth century Tory and Fabian ideals. Many indeed have proposed solutions that came out of the German medical profession even before Hitler — compulsory sterilization, destruction of the deformed and retarded, experiments on humans.

Behind these enthusiasms, however, a new spirit has been patiently at work, testing and analyzing the evidence upon which we are supposed to give up many of our free traditions and moral values. Men like Macrae himself, Wilfred Beckermann, P.T. Bauer, John McHale, John Diebolds, Peter Drucker, Herman Kahn, Buckminster Fuller, Irving Kristol, and John Maddox have warned us that the evidence of the ecologists and the socialists does not add up, at least if our real motive is aiding actual men and women, not in conforming them to some pre-conceived ideology. The essential issue, of course, is now as always not the "facts", but the values and theories in which such facts are studied and understood.

## DOMINANT IDEAS IN FRAGMENTATION

In 1935, John Maynard Keynes wrote that “in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories after they are twenty-five or thirty years old, so that ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.” Some startling change in ideas and even statistics in this area could be seen even back in 1976 when the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs admitted that the world would probably have enough resources to go around in the twenty-first century. Herman Kahn in *The Next 200 Years* further pointed out that there will be enough for *any* century. The day is already long past when a static concept of resources can dominate our future. Resources are a function of human intelligence and need, not of quite inadequate exploration of finite Earth limitations. What we are beginning to learn is not the smallness and niggardliness of the earth, but its variety and richness. The curious ease with which intellectual classes and university circles in the West have been converted to a no-growth anti-capitalist position has been often noted. But these very ideas, more often than has been admitted, have contained a kind of reactionary conservatism in their revolutionary or liberal rhetoric.

Within Christianity, furthermore, we have not just the paradox of the World Council of Churches financing forms of violence in Africa, but equally that of Maximov and Solzhenitsyn coming out of Gulag and warning us not to neglect the absoluteness of moral values. We have numerous clerics becoming marxists in the belief that the solution to the problems of this world is hindered by the Christian insistence on transcendence. Meantime, the Holy Father is Polish and suffers from no ideological illusions.

Third world voices have been ideological, though a change is beginning with the Chinese who are starting to see that Japan is perhaps a better source of growth than Mao. The causes of poverty, we have been told, are exploitation by someone else, by the West, by the United States. This has often been lifted to the dignity of a “theology.” A new economic order is suggested to refashion structures and lines of rule and commerce. The ills of the Third World, in this view, are grounded almost exclusively in the economic and political ideas of the industrialized nations. Yet, even Professor Boulding is willing to write in this context:

The phenomenon of increasing inequality is not, therefore, primarily due, except perhaps to a small degree, to exploitation in the classical sense of the word. The rich countries are rich and the poor countries are poor today not because the poor produce a great deal and the rich take it away from them, but because the rich produce a great deal and the poor do not. There may indeed be patterns of exploitation which underlie the patterns of differential growth, but they are pretty hard to trace; and one concludes indeed that exploitation is only a minor element in explaining the dynamics of the world system, at least in the last 200 years. (p.19)

The degree to which this obviates much of the most outspoken and passionate cultural and religious theorizing about the public order in recent years can hardly be overestimated.

The whole of the western cultural and political process has been, historically, based upon the primacy of man in the universe. That is, man’s ethical and moral relation to himself and the world has been instinctively considered to be obvious, such that the order of nature was seen to be designed for man’s good and purpose. The doubts about the viability and richness of the Earth, however, have introduced another factor into man’s ability and willingness to understand and preserve himself. Logically, the various liberation movements have led to the challenging of the distinctions set forth in classical thought — the distinction between men and gods, male and female, man and beast. The meaning of man and animals has been the subject of the latest in the efforts to challenge the attitude of man on Earth. Peter Singer has written:

Philosophy ought to question the basic assumptions of the age. Thinking through, critically and carefully, what most people take for granted is, I believe, the chief task of philosophy, and it is this task that makes philosophy a worthwhile activity. Regrettably, philosophy does not always live up to its historic role. Philosophers are human beings and they are subject to the preconceptions of the society to which they belong. Sometimes they succeed in breaking free of the prevailing ideology: more often they become its most sophisticated defenders. So, in this case, philosophy as practiced in the universities today does not challenge anyone’s preconceptions about our relations with other species. (pp.156-57)

Thus, our relation to all creatures is suddenly called into question. We not only doubt the inter-connections of classes and races and women and deviant life-styles, but also those of the very animals with ourselves. Man is coming to be looked upon as the disturbing animal in his effort to change the world and himself. “Now we [men] are the disturbance, the plague,” Bill Marvel has brutally written. This is come to be the current doctrine at almost

the very moment in which man's highest well-being and dignity can actually be developed should men retain their sense of their uniqueness and structure in the world.

"It has now been several centuries since the countries of the world, to say nothing of individual men, have shared a common conception of man, society, and the state," Professor Steven Seitz has remarked. (p.13) This lack of a common conception of man has been, in one sense, the justification for the political and social views of modern times, which enshrine man's lack of certitude about where he is to be placed in the chain of being. Theories of tolerance and even world order have been based precisely upon a lack of common belief and definite shared philosophy. Indeed, the very view that men had a common philosophy understood to be true and functioning as a goal or an end has come to be looked upon as a threat to modern society. Yet, the reduction of religion to cultural and class and national peculiarities has left us with nothing to teach about or protect the status and limits of historical man as such. In a very real sense, the problems of the next century will be such that it is precisely intelligence that needs faith to rediscover the human, since it is intelligence, not faith, that has lost sight of the outlines of man. Professor John Senior was not wrong in his remarkable *The Death of Christian Culture*:

According to the powerful proposition at the beginning of philosophy with which Plato and Aristotle refuted sophistry, man is not "the measure of all things;" things measure men, and therefore truth is not a matter of opinion, nor force the arbiter of argument.

The currently established academic religion has as its first principle the axiom that no proposition may be held with such certitude as to exclude its contradictory. (p.125)

The death of intellect has followed the death of faith almost by the force of logic. And Chesterton was not wrong either on this score when he noted that the intellect after Christianity would be very much unlike the same intellect before Christianity arrived in the first place. The choice not to believe can come very close to destruction of the intellectual faculty itself in many cases, cases wherein evidence must be denied to maintain the erroneousness of Christianity.

#### *HISTORICAL CRISIS OF FAITH AND LIFE*

If we return to the beginnings of the modern age, then, it has been taken as obvious from Galileo that the major academic task of religion was that of reconciling itself to science. Ever since the Franciscan scientists of the late middle ages believed they were learning of God by discovering the exact order of physical nature, it has been assumed that faith searched for intellect by restructuring itself to the "certain" facts of an ever-growing body of proved knowledge established by the experimental sciences. These presumably reached a reality out there and so governed intellect. The later influence of Hume and Kant, of course, placed considerable doubt upon just where "out there" might be, but later materialism succeeded, popularly at least, in demonstrating that the opium of the people was certainly not science.

Apologetics for the past century, until it quite generally ceased to exist about a decade ago, was based upon the Thomistic assumption that between science and religion there was no real contradiction. Darwin, Freud, and Einstein, at first sight, seemed to be so certain, so irrefutable that believers were inclined to go to any extreme to accept modern theories as if they were facts. Religious doctrines were often reformulated in a fashion that did not appear to deny the newer certainties. Beginning about thirty years ago, however, scholars like E.L. Mascal, Stanislaus Jaki, Karl Heim, and A.C. Crombie began to hint that the more science progressed, the closer it seemed to come to the basic truths of classical Christianity. This was an unsettling and well-kept secret for the most part. Those earlier days were ones in which the prestige of science went to chemistry and especially physics. Of what was the universe made? What was its order? What were the smallest and largest particles? How fast did the various bodies move? Sub-atomic physics and astronomy seemed to parallel each other. Often, it seemed difficult to maintain the difference.

In more recent years, however, these older sciences have begun to recede from popularity. Men have now walked on the moon. They have put mechanical shovels on Mars, bounced lasers off other planets, have space vehicles going by Mars and Venus and Jupiter. Man is no longer the terrestrial being he defined himself to be. Krafft Ehrlicke insists that we have "an extra-terrestrial imperative," something science fiction always assumed, something that Christianity also presupposed. Likewise, we have discovered biology. Chemistry and physics, even astronomy, suddenly have come to be seen in the light of life. Failure to find life on other celestial bodies, even though life someplace in the universe seems a statistical certainty, has made us wonder, in spite of evolutionary theory, if we are not alone in the universe. In a way, we seem to be returning to the greatest of the ancient

philosophers, to Aristotle himself. We do not like to admit there may be such an unpleasant reality as teleology. But animals and plants, even men, do seem to occur in a rather regular way, in some kind of purposeful order.

Moreover, we have discovered resources — earth, air, fire, and water. Plants, animals, and men depend on these after all. If they are used up or polluted, we are constantly being warned, life is in jeopardy. Therefore, we catch ourselves asking about the ends of life and earth and animals and plants. “The dooms-day question — When and how will the human race die out? — has assumed a new perspective as scientific knowledge has advanced in several areas,” Malcolm W. Browne has written. “The subject is a matter of heated controversy on campuses and in laboratories across the nation.” And we want to know whether animals ought to suffer, whether the eight percent of the Earth’s crust that is aluminum is enough. E.F. Schumacher warned us in *Small Is Beautiful* to change our whole concept of the end of economic life. We have spent four hundred years changing everything. We must stop. “The Four Hundred Year Boom,” as Walter Prescott Webb called it, is presumably over. So we must begin to talk about permanent things. We must rediscover the thing-in-itself — Aristotle’s substance — and not just qualities useful to men.

During the Christian centuries, the concept of the “end of the world” was still a religious category. It was indeed gnostic, as Eric Voegelin kept reminding us, to propose that reason could solve all our problems, that salvation could be subjected directly to a human political process. Yet, as we have seen today the notion of the end of the world has astonishingly become a scientific and political concept. Whole generations of students and professors with hardly a word of protest have dropped the optimistic aura of modern thought and switched to a pessimism as profound as anything religious history has ever conceived. Men no longer believe in the goodness of being or in the inherent dignity of individual human life. Often they have embraced man’s sinfulness without recognizing his worth. The ideas of immortal soul, personal creation, transcendent destiny are hardly comprehended. Our generation has come to believe in the most terrible of human doctrines, that only the perfect human lives are worth living. We kill those we expect to be born less than perfect. We study death, “thanatology,” as if it were a science and avoid in developed cultures passing on life to many offspring because we cannot conceive, quite literally, how life itself can be a gift that is not ours to take or judge. The reasons for all of this are obscurely intellectual. Too many have uniformly given up our latent Christian heritage because they could not see the distortions contained in such dogmatic images as those of the lifeboat or the spaceship or the last battle (tirage) in which we are supposed to be engaged.

Thus, we have come to believe, on the basis of a few well-publicized studies, mostly inaccurate, that the Earth is too small, that humans “breed” too rapidly, that resources are finite. On such bases, we have felt justified in calling into question those virtues of generosity, sacrifice, concern for the weak that we have been given from our religious past. This is perhaps the only generation in the history of man that has not accepted as self-evident the right of life. Thus, many lives, we are informed, are not worth living. That is, we presume to judge the value and dignity of life for others.

#### A RETURN TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

For Aristotle and Aquinas, however, life was the first truth, a principle which, when questioned or doubted, paralyzed thought itself. The ancients held that the mind could know and ask about the origin and destiny of life. We must still feel that sense of shock and amazement betrayed by Glaucon in the last Book of the *Republic* of Plato when he realized Socrates was quite serious about the immortality of the soul. But to doubt life’s worth, to question its validity, approached blasphemy, since it called the very power of reality into question. Yet currently what has a “right” to exist is *not* life, but the best *possible* life. Aristotle’s optimal criterion for the *Polis* has become a deadly weapon against life itself. There are lives, we are told again, not worth living. And this is the ultimate human arrogance. Do we in the human city have an obligation to decide which lives are worth living? This is the one right we do not have and do not want to have. We too must learn that political philosophy looks to what is first given, to the humans born among us. It then seeks to enable them freely to become better as men and women. Almost as if to confirm that the older tradition was more right than we were willing to credit it, Professor Willard Gaylin’s *“Doing Good”*: *The Limits of Benevolence* suddenly begins to argue that our sense of dependence, our natural way of being as conceived and growing is the foundation of most of the values we have, while even *The New York Times* is putting in a caution about population bomb fears: “The Rev. Thomas Malthus was mistaken in his conclusions two centuries ago, and so, it appears, are his successors. The demographic sky may be overcast, but it is not falling.”

In our time, then, the intellect seeks faith because, in seeking mainly itself, it has only ended up in doubting the very existence of actual men. We are no longer in an era in which the understanding of the world and man himself is the obstacle that prevents men from achieving a truer picture of what humanity can accomplish. What we

lack is rather some abiding justification for man remaining man. What seems clear now is that the Earth and the surrounding cosmos are more than adequate for the life of the creature man, however long he might last. And this abundance is revealed by man's intellect. But we have misunderstood what we mean by reform. We have forgotten the relation of man to cosmos as set down for us in *Genesis* and *Romans* and in Aristotle's *Politics*. We have overlooked de Tocqueville's hint, itself reflective of Aquinas, indeed of Plato, that the Deity sees us in our particularity. The revelation of the Christian God is likewise directed to our uniqueness, to what makes us particular. It is not directed to ideal man, but to the men who come forth by human will and historical chance and human generation, in its virtue and in its vice, to those in short who are created in the Image of God.

Political and economic society among men while on Earth must begin and end in this absoluteness of particularity and uniqueness of each person. Each person thus becomes in a way a good, common to all, to which all else is ordered. This means that man's betterment is actually a process of choice, of virtue, of intelligence. It is corrupted by choice, by vice, by intelligence working for ends that are not those of unique persons. Men are not universal ideas, replaceable parts of a whole. They are separate persons who have neither omnipotence nor control over other persons. Their relationships to others begin with their lives, not their perfect lives but their actual lives. And they proceed by speech and persuasion and intelligence, by what makes them unique beings in the world. Should some men be weak or poor or even vicious, their dignity is still the criterion of life's quality. We begin with a given, with what we are as persons. The respect for all life that is beginning to take root among us from the side of animal care and concern is, paradoxically, a sign that our ethic has failed the human animal himself.

Yet there is no longer any lack of knowledge about men and Earth. And choice is left, that faculty according to which we are to make ourselves *good* men. Faith, it now appears, is the only thing that can keep men open to themselves, their own worth, even though they be not each perfect. Faith teaches us precisely to love our "neighbor," not the idea of neighborliness or the idea of the perfect life. The lack of a common idea of man has thus come to justify a change in man, a doubt in and about his own worth. "Be ye perfect" has come to be a formula for destroying actual incipient human life because we forget that this "perfection" in its original statement bears the restriction, "as your heavenly Father is perfect." And the perfection the heavenly Father looks to lies in persons, in their particularity, to the man Socrates but not to generic man. Our times finally are coming to realize in practice that it takes faith to discover — and to keep — each and every man.

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