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## EDITORIAL: THE SECULAR TRADITION

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IT REMAINS THE CLASSIC CRY OF MODERN MAN THAT IN HIS EFFORTS TO FLOUT the eternal order of the universe he is but liberating himself from a dark, backward and restrictive vision of man imposed by priestcraft during the age of the ascendancy of the Roman Catholic Church. In Academia, young men and women continue to be exposed each year to an intellectual elite which claims to be leading them beyond the traditional perspective of their homes and churches into new and untried solutions to the problems of the race. We still hear that to be religious is to be old-fashioned, and that to be secular is to be in advance of one's time.

Need we say bosh? The truth of the matter is that secularization is so old-hat that we are now witnessing the profound alienation of those, even of high school age, who have heard nothing but secular solutions and found them wanting. One reason campus radicalism is dead is that the current crop of students has heard most of the standard intellectual cant while already in high school-and is already properly bored. Adults can hardly remember a time when non-secular solutions were proposed for civilizational problems, or remember a time when a secular solution seemed fresh and new. It is plain fact that secularism is now a tradition and, moreover, a dominant tradition, with a history stretching back half a millenium and a dominance stretching back at least into the nineteenth century. Let us review the rise of the secular tradition, and see what this means.

A number of unfortunate factors conspired to weaken the Catholic Church during the later middle ages when the story of secularization began. But surely the most important single factor was the Black Death. Nearly half the population of Europe was wiped out during the fourteenth century, and, just as many of the dying were frantically making over their wills to the benefit of diocese and order, the bishops and religious superiors had to lower recruitment standards in order to attract sufficient personnel to fill the more-than-decimated ranks of the clergy. Within a generation, an extraordinary laxity had become endemic to the Church; within another generation the reform was well underway (led by such luminaries as St. Catherine of Siena), but, in the meantime, trouble struck.

The first trouble was the movement known popularly as the Renaissance. The genuine achievements of this age are everywhere lauded, so one may be permitted to point out the negative. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Western literati became increasingly familiar with and enamored of ancient Greek and Roman civilization. In many respects that civilization was superior to the culture of the high middle ages (although in many respects it was not); the upshot is that many thinkers began to focus on certain natural aspects of man not stressed during the preceding several centuries, leading to an effort to reconcile naturalistic humanism with the supernatural perspective of Christianity. This process proceeded by fits and starts, and certainly not without error, but there is considerable evidence that a proper synthesis would have been worked out in time, if it had not been for the Protestant Revolt.

The Revolt struck a somewhat complacent Church at the time when the tensions between traditional Christian values and neo-classicism were at their height. Throughout northern Europe, the Protestants overthrew time-honored institutions of both Church and State, precipitated religious wars, and drove a theoretical wedge between faith and

works. It was not only that so many of the sacraments were abolished, depriving the world of grace; rather, all of these things led toward greater secularization as the ability of the Catholic Church to respond to new challenges in a creative and confident manner declined.

As the seventeenth century opened, several currents were working to shape the modern West in a non-religious form. England, which had become the only unified, stable Protestant nation, was beginning her rise to dominance even then. She and her American offspring would spread secular values throughout the entire world in the succeeding centuries. Meanwhile, religious war was proving a high cost for theological disagreement. While some hid their faith to avoid persecution or battle, the intellectuals began to conclude, erroneously, that the truth about God and man could not be found, at least not by means of Revelation. At the same time, the new science was offering different kinds of interests and other insights to men who were sick and tired of theological and philosophical dispute. All the eggs tended to be put rapidly into the basket of empirical science; the Copernican Revolution had convinced men that they were quite small in the eyes of God, while Newton's laws were heralded as bringing all to light.

The result, in a word, was Rationalism. The so-called Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented reliance on human reason to solve the age-old problems of mankind, a narrowing of perspective to exclude the supernatural, and ultimately a hostility toward those who focused upon the next life, on the charge that they slowed down the achievement of perfection here below. The only possible outcome was an ideology of revolution, by which the progress of man's mind would make possible a sweeping aside of past mistakes and the erection of a new and satisfactory order of human affairs. This rationalist ideology, enshrined in its purest form in the French Revolution, would influence the development of later radical ideologies, including that of atheistic communism.

It may well be wondered why the reign of terror of 1793-4 did not cause more men to abandon their vain secular hopes, as did the suicide Condorcet, when he saw that 'perfect' reason brought terrible results. The answer lies largely in the material success of the nineteenth century, the industrial age. It was during this period that science bore rich fruit in technology, beginning that unnecessary yet vast retreat from nature and reality which Mr. Donald de Marco explores in this issue; and it was also then that

the very success of science and technology bred even a popular conviction that science was all there was, an inappropriate metaphysical conviction debated by Mr. Thomas Fowler later in these pages. In a word, men began to confuse reality with phenomena, nature with technology. But they did so successfully, from the material point of view, and the ultimate questions were relatively easily pushed to the background in what must be described, as we move to the present age, as an orgy of self-indulgence-now discovered to be only a poor substitute for happiness.

We can do no more in this short space than propose a thumbnail sketch of the history of this vast tradition of secularization. But sometime in the nineteenth century, certainly by the time liberalism was enshrined as an ideology by John Stuart Mill, the secular tradition became the dominant tradition in the declining West. The advent of mass education served within a few generations to saturate all of society with the banalities of that tradition, so that now, once again, there is nothing new under the sun.

Except, of course, Christianity. It will do no good to say that those who retain their faith (or discover it anew) are slaves to tradition, and that those who abandon it (or fail to find it) are liberated. The whole weight of the culture of the past centuries disposes the mind to the rejection of the living God. Only those who can break the bonds of cultural conditioning are free enough to adopt the Catholic view. Only those who die to their past can rise with Christ.

Catholic scholars, then, must recognize the current state of affairs for what it is: the result of a dominant secular tradition which has shaped, or rather distorted, the modern West down to the last detail. That tradition must be ruthlessly dissected, every flaw laid bare, every weakness remedied, if the West is to be restored to health. For the present, there are far too many people who think they are sick from the cure rather than from the disease. Therefore, a key apologetical task, with those who are ready for real solutions, is to show clearly the dominance of the secular tradition and how it has infected our lives. This may well serve as the background for the fresh appearance of the Christian life. For while the Faith is good medicine, men will not take it until they know why they are ill.

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J.A.M.