



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Fall 1992 | Vol. XVIII, No. 3

---

---

## SHOULD THE CATHOLIC CHURCH SECEDE FROM THE UNION?

*Robert A. Herrera*

---

---



OVER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY YEARS AGO THE SOUTHERN STATES SECEDED FROM the federal union. The two major sections of the nation came to the realization that a co-existence which had become laborious and conflictive was an impossible task. Two contradictory way of being could not flourish under one flag. The United States, with the destruction of the Confederacy, lost a vigorous and gifted people as well as a rich source of autochthonous culture. Today's tarted-up South is barely a shadow of the Confederacy which, after the military debacle, expired from anemia when, to use Mencken's apposite phrase, it ceased to be fertilized from above.

There were many notions common to Southern political thinkers which, had they been seriously considered, might have helped us avoid the shoals on which the American Republic is presently foundering. The notions that unlimited freedom and equality are noxious, that government becomes despotic and absolute to the proportion that the people become debased and corrupt, should certainly be included among the most important. On the same level perhaps is Calhoun's admonition against identifying the numerical majority with the "people," and many other sage insights. Unfortunately, at this critical moment of American history an exercise in nostalgia, while pleasantly decadent, simply is pointless. These speculations succumbed with the Confederacy and remain, at best, grand antiques of a bygone era.

Although the analogy is forced, one may ask whether there is a similar situation in evidence today. The estrangement between the American Republic, or at least American public opinion, and the more traditional segment of American Catholicism, seems to reproduce the older conflict on another dimension. In spite of its tilt towards radical democracy and episodes of egalitarian fervor, American Catholicism nevertheless is moving further away from a public orthodoxy which has found it to be definitely not clubable. It's epileptic attempts at accommodation, its enthusiasm for the icons of the day, even its endorsements of certain popular fads and shibboleths, have only served to add a measure of silliness to what was always considered to be an unsavory intruder. The efforts of many clergy and laity to shed their spots and become ecumenically pure have scarcely met with success. Catholicism remains a raw and unsettling presence whose chances of wholehearted acceptance by the American people at large is negligible.

On the other hand, viewed from the perspective of Catholic orthodoxy, American society has during the past half-century become far less acceptable. It seems to thrive on perversion, a frank distortion of the normative in morality, thought, and language which has surfaced as a new-speak rooted in a new-think of major proportions. Chesterton once stated that the revolutionary triad of *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite*, were secularized Christian virtues gone wild. Today's "good things" can also be viewed as perversions of better things: abortion of life, eroticism of sex, ethnic hubris of justice, political correctness of freedom, and multiculturalism of education. In back of all these manifestations of contemporary perversity, at their ground and pushing them forward, is a secularized, distorted, version of the theological virtue of charity, which demands the abolition of rule, limit, and hierarchy in the service of a monolithic

egalitarianism.

A few decades ago, in a book written in more optimistic times, Cardinal Jean Danielou attempted to fix the role of the secular state vis-a-vis Christianity and the drama of salvation.<sup>1</sup> He indicated that the principal task of the political order is to constitute a society in which men can fulfill themselves by living a satisfactory material, fraternal, and spiritual life. As Church and State have complimentary functions, the Cardinal urged that Christians should “struggle to bring the earthly city into conformity with its charter,”<sup>2</sup> viz., that it should fulfill its duty of structuring a society open to the promptings of grace. By doing so, Christians work for the betterment of both the secular and the spiritual orders.

In spite of his generally optimistic tone, Danielou entertains the possibility - in line with the history of Church-State relations beginning perhaps with the Renaissance - of a monolithic secularism closed to spiritual imperatives. This, he suggests, would make the survival of the Christian people qua Christian problematic and even threaten the survival of civilization itself. Looking at our contemporary panorama a good case can be made that we are approaching such a perilous situation. The political scaffolding which Cardinal Danielou envisioned as providing access to the heavenly city is, if not completely gutted, at least in a state of serious disrepair.

One of the more consoling aspects of the Christian interpretation of history is that both complete novelty and the monotonous repetition of the same are excluded from its repertoire. The biblical account of creation shattered the eternal universe of the Greek philosophers burdened with its endless cycles. Biblical thought also suggested a correspondence between events, their causes, and events which are to come. This permits us to search for epochs analogous to our own with the hope that the unfolding of events and proximate causes recorded there can provide us with a key to interpret the present. Each epoch, except perhaps the happiest or most vacant, has its own peculiar bard who can be called to the witness

stand.

Jonathan Swift wrote his acerbic Tale of a Tub<sup>3</sup> nearly three centuries ago in a society unlike our own in most things except evil. He savaged contemporary customs and institutions - a rainbow coalition of aberrations - with gusto, free from self-deception and the cosmetic imperative. Dean Swift possessed a good nose for the depravity of his age, in its frauds and mountebanks



assuming the guise of respectability. The “Author” is a reflection of his world, the tubbian world, a man who is writing a treatise on Nothing while collecting data for a work to be called *A Modest Defense of the Proceedings of the Rabble in all Ages*. Like Sartre and other intellectuals of our century, the “Author” enjoys melding speculative esoterica to progressive ideology.

He is obsessed with externals to the point of suggesting that man is essentially a microcoat, a suit of clothes. As man is what he wears, the external shell suffices for his well-being. The Tubbian world puts its highest value on happiness, an unexceptional aspiration. But this is not the objective goal of human life as in the Aristotelian tradition but “the perpetual possession of being well deceived.”<sup>4</sup> Swift’s “modern” - much the same as our politically correct drudge - cuts himself off from the past, becomes captive to his imagination, and lives only through the medium of constantly changing facades or “suits of clothes.” Both embrace the fad of the moment and fall victim to the quack nostrums of the day. Both are victimized by “concerned citizens” using the universal improvement of mankind as appetizing bait for the incurably naive. More pathetic still, both victimizer and victim are locked in intimate solidarity, their delicate moral antennae twitching in unison.

Swift was convinced that the acclaimed “marvels” of the tubbian world were ultimately caused by insanity, sheer madness. He gives precious examples of the convoluted reasoning which leads to the perversion of the intellect. Attentive to subtle and perverse turns he moves from the premiss, “words are but winds” to the conclusion that “the gift of belching is the noblest act of

rational creature,”<sup>5</sup> setting the pattern for ideological apologia up to the present. Several of our own political leaders are not very different from Swift’s “Phanatic Preacher,” characterized by a deadly mixture of inward light and a head full of maggots.<sup>6</sup> The current proliferation of minorities of all types bears comparison with the plethora of schools in his Academy of Wits.

The tubbian world pullulates with citizens obsessed by the urge to pontificate, philosophize, build castles in the air. With an insight which is no less than prescient, Swift indicates that the mountebank’s stage is the “great seminary” - the preparatory school - which leads to both the clergyman’s pulpit and the gallows of the highwayman.<sup>7</sup> Today the stage has been replaced by the media, equally serviceable, which also takes its inspiration from the lowest forms of entertainment. Contemporary man has learned to his dismay that these castles in the air forged by the media can return to plague him. McLuhan pointed to the idiosyncratic character of electronic media. Plato made it clear in the *Gorgias* that sophistry and its equivalents are politically and socially noxious.

Swift deftly fingered the deepest root of the horrors of the tubbian world, the ancient satanic lust for autonomy. When human reason attempts to break loose from God - to “liberate” itself - it is transformed into unreason, into insanity. The very absurdity of this world, its uprootedness and whimsical nature, measures the distance which man has moved away from God. It is appropriate that the high point of *A Tale of a Tub* is a section on insanity in which Swift proposes the thesis of a Bedlam coextensive with the human race. This is perhaps the best solution for the “slaughter-bench” of human history, really only a few steps away from the Christian doctrine of original sin.

Professor Bloom’s recent critique of American society and education follows in the tradition of *A Tale of a Tub* albeit on a minor key. It is ironic that Dean Swift’s major adversaries - modernists, rationalists, deists, the Royal Society - are hardly the villains of *The Closing of the American Mind*.<sup>8</sup> Professor Bloom blames the present catastrophic state of affairs on the German philosophy of the past century or so as interpreted by the American mind. He absolves those who are probably the real culprits - Rousseau and the Enlightenment - and places the French Revolution, the seedbed of future horrors, in the same category as its English and American analogs. All three, in Bloom’s opinion, were fought for freedom and

equality! Nietzsche was not far off target when he called “preachers of equality” tarantulas and dealers in hidden revenge. Yet, Bloom may have had second thoughts. This is suggested by his remark that Rousseau removed the “floor” which Hobbes and Locke had hoped to find, and “man has tumbled into ... the basement, which now appears to be bottomless.”<sup>9</sup>

Professor Bloom is not as insightful a critic of the American scene as Santayana and Mencken were or as is Russell Kirk.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he is gifted with the sharp but limited vision generated by indignation; a liberal academic shocked into the realization that the Brave New World he had furthered and perhaps eagerly awaited is in truth a nightmare. Bloom attacks many contemporary depravities: it’s relativism, inflamed sensitivity, and uprootedness. He marks the decay of the family, the emasculation of religion, the loss of books, and the foibles of an anomic student body. More important, he points to the creation of “a new language of morality” in which good and evil are reduced to subjective emotion and aberrations provided with justifications.<sup>11</sup>



Centering on academic life, Professor Bloom views most students as “flat-souled,” devoid of tradition, and most faculty as pandering to the passions of the masses while collaborating in their fondest dreams. Public opinion, kept at bay in the past now imposes itself dictatorially, and brings venerable but shopworn notions such as equality, freedom, and peace, to radical new life pulsating with destructive passion. The curriculum has been trashed, the humanities in disarray, the classics relegated to cob-webbed corners of library vaults. Professor Bloom’s account is dismal.

Bloom could have noted the short distance which separates Rousseau’s *Confessions* from Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the similarity between their complementary though often conflicting theses. Rousseau initiated a radical re-evaluation of morals which effected a violent break with the past, its traditions, customs, and usages. He was later followed by Nietzsche and Freud. Rousseau was the first to turn humanity on its head, place the superior functions in the lower belly, and replace the intellect by the proddings of sensitivity. The Rousseauian

man is very near to the Tyrannical Man of the *Republic* who does what the average man dreams. Before Professor Bloom, Edmund Burke had observed that philosophers were at least in part responsible for the deviations of youth: “in order to insinuate their polluted atheism into young minds.... [they] ... systematically flatter all their passions, natural and unnatural.”<sup>12</sup>

The contemporary world is nominalistic with a vengeance. It lavishes, through the media, an inordinate amount of attention on the individual viewed as an isolated atom, the result of several centuries of social distillation. We are flooded with an ocean of trivia concerning the most banal aspects of life. Quite rightly, Marx blamed Capitalism for creating a world in which the worker felt truly human only when exercising his lower functions. Ironically, today this not only seems to be the rule but the desideratum of even Marxist-inspired groups. Lacking the bonds necessary to anneal passing generations into a single atemporal community, the higher things are reduced either to gilt-edged fraud or mere whim. These are obvious symptoms of decadence and it would be difficult to deny that we are standing at the end point of a spiral of decay. The socio-political aspect of this decline was described by Plato in *the Republic*, and in more recent times, by J. B. Vico. The theme was then taken up and embroidered by Nietzsche, Spengler, and Ortega, to name only the most prominent. More than a theme it became a pervading atmosphere.

The seriousness of the disease cannot be ignored. We are today under attack from a multiplicity of enthusiasms, fads, and sects, which present an extensive range of solutions for an equally extensive range of problems. We are at the mercy of an unprincipled media and victimized by social unrest. No doubt we have fallen into Professor Bloom’s “floorless basement.” Religion, morality, and authentic culture have been all but discarded, education savaged, all at the mercy of the masses and ideology. Multiculturalism is the sign of ultimate decay, the latest and most noxious form of self-deception.

The masses and the academics are partially to blame. The cultural void presented by the masses attracts the creative hubris of the professors: why not turn the world into a gigantic red school house? Though both are falling victim to the lure of correct opinion - today’s public orthodoxy - it should be added in their defense that several of the most outstanding thinkers of our century also succumbed to the siren-song of mass ideology. It

now seems that Heidegger’s infatuation with National Socialism was more than a passing flirtation. Sartre’s commitment to Marxism was deep and constant, though the works dedicated to the cause lack the imagination and insight he customarily displayed. Perhaps philosophical innovation and the consequent eclipse of the objective order led eventually to the success of mass ideologies which appeal to the instinctual and irrational.

The Catholic Church has suffered extensively from these depredations, at times in spite of itself. Catholics in the United States have been in the unfortunate position - perhaps because of their largely immigrant background - of having been considered subpar at least socially and intellectually by the elites. The “great awakening” subsequent to Vatican II only served to confirm this negative opinion. The burgeoning of “Christians come of age” in the Church both startled and amused the American public and caused immeasurable harm to all concerned, above all to the Church at large. Unfortunately, the laity were only following the example of distinguished prelates, clerics, and the general trend of Catholic higher education. A bizarre combination of intellectual hubris, religious masochism, and a strong distaste for tradition, produced an orgy of bad taste which has perdured, in a variety of forms, to this day. Mencken has again been vindicated for pointing to “the libido for the ugly” as a characteristic of the American people.

The Catholic Church can no longer be considered a conservative force able to use its prestige to uphold the fragile edifice of society. Things have changed since Tocqueville noted the conservative effect of Catholicism on American life and Babbitt suggested that the day might arrive in which the Catholic Church would become the only effective instrument for preserving civilization. This change of direction is especially significant as the radical democratic ideology which inspired Catholicism’s turn to the left derives its strength from its Christian origin, to which it stands as malevolent double.

Contemporary society has experienced the strength of this malevolent double and is in the process of succumbing to its attraction. It is reflected in the progressive withdrawal from the normative we are presently experiencing which is pan passu withdrawal from orthodox Christianity. Unfortunately, most Catholics - if polls are to be trusted - appear to endorse the latest abominations. Abortion, homosexuality, rampaging eroticism, permissiveness, secularism, do not encounter any mass

Catholic opposition. At best they are given a hearing and talked to death, in line with the promptings of the media. But if everything is talkable it follows that nothing is sacred. The vacuous chatter of the brothel becomes the norm. Eternal verities are placed on the same level as trivia and moral truths reduced to the level of mere values subject to individual caprice.

Today the Catholic is obliged to follow, as best he may, the authentic Christian vocation of being a sign of contradiction, swimming against the current of the "mundus" in whatever form it may assume. He is forced in conscience to be an anachronism in a world in which God is absent. This is a difficult task, more so as "ecumenism" and "dialogue," understood in the most banal sense, have become social if not religious imperatives. The Catholic should opt for the normative against the abnormal, orthodoxy against novelty, tradition against fad. The role of education is of paramount importance in providing an effective antidote to the historical aphasia which prevails by re-connecting the student to his religious and national past. It should be evident that the only alternative to the often maligned academic Ivory Tower is the Tower of Babel and after having experienced the second we should opt for the first. To follow in the steps of contemporary America is to condemn orthodox Christianity to death by trivialization.

The American Catholic dream of melding orthodoxy and progressive democracy has proven to be specious, an impossible dream. Those who still adhere to this phantasy are as distant from reality as is the silly Don of the Broadway stage from Cervantes' superb Quixote. Like those Catholics who followed the star of the Fre-

nch Revolution these progressive Christians will enjoy a brief moment of notoriety followed by oblivion. The guillotine, after all, had the merit of cutting chatter as well as heads. This, earlier transvaluation of values produced Robespierre and The Terror although like the present crisis, it began with impossible dreams and noble sentiments. The contemporary heirs to Robespierre - equally assured of their moral rectitude - are headed in the same direction and will eventually pay the maximum penalty for dealing in false coin.

America has provided a home in which Catholicism has flourished. Unfortunately, material success is often deadly to spiritual enterprises. The present difficulties are the result of success not of failure. There is little doubt that American Catholics will continue to cooperate with the national enterprise and be, as they always have been, as American as any and more American than most. At the same time Catholics are obliged to remain faithful to the deposit of faith which the present generation has received and has the awesome responsibility of passing on to the future.

It is fortunate that at this point the religious and the political seem to coincide. The turn towards a radically democratic society - levelling and egalitarian - strengthens those submerged pantheistic urges which surface as hostility against Christianity and the Church. But also, as American thinkers from Fisher Ames to Irving Babbitt have noted, it endangers our civic liberties and the structures which make them possible. Because of this, although a declaration of war would be premature, strategy dictates that siege artillery be rapidly installed within range of the secular Fort Sumter.

## NOTES

- 1Jean Danielou, *Prayer as a Political Problem*, ed. & trans. J. R. Kirwan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967).
- 2Ibid., pp. 27ff.; 121ff.
- 3A Tale of a Tub. *Jonathan Swift: A Selection of His Works* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1965).
- 4Ibid., pp. 414, 350.
- 5Ibid., pp. 401-404.
- 6Ibid., p. 339, note 6.
- 7Ibid., p. 337ff.
- 8Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 55, 147-148, 188-323.
- 9Ibid., pp. 176-177.
- 10Refer to George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York: George Braziller, 1955); H. L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1926); Russell Kirk, *Enemies of Permanent Things* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969).
- 11Bloom, op. cit., p. 141.
- 12Burke to Chevalier de Revarol (1791). Cited by Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (South Bend: Gateway, 1978), p. 29, note.

