

The American Mirage

(From *Église et politique: Changer de paradigme*, ed. Bernard Dumont--Artege, 2013)

(This article by John Rao, appeared as Chapter 3 in the above book published in French. Subtitles in bold have been inserted by the Editor of *Apropos*. This article has been posted on the *Apropos* website: www.apropos.org.uk)

A. American Pluralism: Pragmatic or Dogmatic?

America – sole model for order?

Various developments during the last three decades have encouraged the belief that America provides the sole serious model for global political and social order. Conservative, neo-conservative, and libertarian American think tanks have undertaken a well-financed, worldwide campaign on behalf of that model. Prominent American Catholic writers and public figures, building upon the earlier praise of the national socio-political experience by European thinkers such as Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University from 1948-1952, have played a major role in these think tanks' crusade. Such Catholics have proven to be especially eager to gain official Church approval for their message. In doing so, they have helped to strengthen acceptance of crucial dogmas that lie at the heart of the American model; dogmas that contributed significantly to the ethos guiding the Second Vatican Council and the reforms following in its wake: the dogmas of pluralism.

A haven where the Church could thrive

“Dogmatic” is not a word that pluralists themselves would ever use to describe their approach. They argue that pluralism is nothing other than a pragmatic “method” designed to deal with the undeniable diversity of constantly changing modern societies. Pluralists claim that the only demand this method makes upon religions is their need to accept a civil freedom for all faiths to co-exist peacefully. What could be a more obvious blessing in a world where religious conflict has caused incalculable human suffering? Surely Catholics, as believers in a God of love and peace, do not wish to stimulate still more hatred among men? Has history not amply demonstrated to them that a forced march to Catholic Truth ensures a Church dependence upon State power that corrupts the full Christian message and limits its spread? Is Catholicism not powerful enough to stand on the strength of its own teaching in a free marketplace of ideas? And, finally---as European proponents of the Declaration on Religious Liberty at Second Vatican Council like Maritain were particularly eager to emphasize---was it not the case that the United States of America, where pluralism first blossomed, offered a splendid example of just how well the Catholic Church could thrive in the free and peaceful society guaranteed by its pragmatic vision?

Pluralist dogma

My contention here, however, is that this pluralist methodology, rather than being a practical tool humbly recognizing and responding to obvious facts of modern life, is an evangelical dogma that works authoritatively to shape the religions and cultures that it claims to liberate. That dogma

allows no competition in its call to unquestioning belief and positive action corresponding to its precepts, whether from Catholicism or any other worldview with a substantive message of its own. In practice, the “freedom” that it provides works to strip communities such as the Catholic Church of the ability to teach and fulfill their mission. It “liberates” individuals alone, and for the purpose of satisfying all manner of material and intellectual passions. Under these circumstances, it is the strongest wills that come to dominate the pluralist environment, winning control of the very definition of the terms “common sense”, “social order”, “freedom”, and “justice” in the process.

Pluralist fideism

As pluralism progresses, it also trains the societies and individuals who accept its dogmas to abandon each and every one of the tools necessary to understand what actually happens to them under its aegis. Catholicism, which is respectful of both Revelation and Reason, possesses means for testing the harmony of its practice to its beliefs. It thereby retains the capacity to criticize and correct its practical flaws and sharpen an accurate appreciation of its Deposit of Faith. But pluralist dogmatism does not offer a faith seeking understanding. Instead, it represents a *fideism* that prohibits investigation of its central tenets and the real consequences flowing from them. Pluralism replaces scientific analysis with a demand for recitation of intellectual, political, and social slogans. These slogans praise the constructive merits of its emasculating work and condemn the dangerous, “divisive spirit” engendered by any questioning of its fundamental principles and their effect; in short, they pressure substantive religions and cultures to “smile” as they reduce themselves to impotence and die. And all of these aspects of pluralism---the dogmatic content, the liberation of willfulness, and the slogan drenched call to mindless suicide with a smile---could readily have been uncovered at the time of the Second Vatican Council if Catholic leaders had seriously examined its development in America.¹

B. The Growth of American Pluralist Fideism

The Founding Fathers and their immediate successors built the United States primarily out of materials derived from America’s British heritage. But this inheritance, by the late eighteenth century, was a schizophrenic one. The “house divided against itself” that it represented was to remain forever significant in shaping the spirit of the new land as it grew, confronted changing conditions threatening its survival, and devised a many-faceted but disturbing solution to its problems.

The British Legacy – Calvinist and Enlightenment

On the one hand, America’s British heritage included the influence of Christianity, especially in that Calvinist form that rigorously emphasized the basic Protestant doctrine of total depravity. This teaching left individuals as the helpless slaves of sin, dependent for salvation upon the willful choice

¹ For the general argument, see John Rao, *Americanism and the Collapse of the Church in the United States* (Tan, 1994, available on jcras.freeshell.org); Thomas Molnar, *Le modèle défiguré* (PUF, 1978); On modern America, Jean-Marie Mayeur, ed., *Histoire du Christianisme* (Thirteen Volumes, Desclée, 1990-2000), XII, 833-924; XIII; On conservatives and Catholics, Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Cornell, 1995).

of an omnipotent God whom men still hoped might somehow be moved to mercy through their faith in Him. It had no room for an authoritative, sacramental Church judged to be as depraved as the rest of nature and therefore incapable of truthful, holy, and efficacious action. Even though religious communities touched by Calvinism continued to function, they did so either as stubborn remnants of the past useful to the survival of the State---as with the tame Anglicanism of the eighteenth century---or as purely utilitarian mechanisms for the defense of believing individuals from oppressive political authorities---as in the case of the Puritans.

On the other hand, the British legacy also involved the influence of the so-called moderate Enlightenment, which a number of Anglicans and Puritans had themselves played a major role in forming. Religious-minded supporters of the moderate Enlightenment were horrified by the atheism of radical thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and wanted to encourage belief in a Creator and a pious life in accord with His wishes. Still, they were convinced that the Creator's plan could not be known and followed through obedience to the confessional religions whose relentless quarreling brought mockery upon all faith. God, they insisted, could only be worshipped properly in a way that seemingly overturned the concept of total depravity: through a peaceful development of the natural world that He had given men as their home. And this required nothing more for its good governance than that obvious Christian moral teaching that was now an integral and unquestionable part of the common western inheritance.³

The Whig Oligarchy

But the moderate British Enlightenment was not the work solely of men who retained some faith in a Creator God. It won its pacifying influence over religious life in alliance with the English propertied class. Although, as Protestants, members of this class were indeed concerned for ridding themselves of the catholicizing Stuart Dynasty, as property owners they were *chiefly* troubled by the fact that Stuart efforts to strengthen the State were a threat to the undisturbed management of their personal wealth and their freedom to enhance it. Religious and secular-minded forces converged to form that Whig oligarchy that made the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Protestant Succession of the eighteenth century possible. John Locke (1632-1704) then elaborated the philosophical and political underpinnings of that Revolution. And his influence over the American system through men like James Madison (1751-1836), the father of the American Constitution, was paramount.⁴

Emasculating an overly moralizing Church

Madison grasped the importance of two central concepts enunciated by Locke: religious toleration and a division of governmental powers. Locke identified religious toleration as an eminently Christian principle, and one that pious people should appreciate. After all, did it not allow space for public expression of belief in a world where every confession was potentially threatened by

³ Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land* (Penguin, 1985), pp. 25-166 for early America; *On Protestantism and the development of the Moderate Enlightenment*, see Jonathan Israel. *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2002), p. 447-561; *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford, 2009), 201-222, 344-405; Mayeur, IX, 157-206, 488-499, 931-1033, 1089-1169; X, 216-228; Also, Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment* (U. of California, 2006), pp. 1-57; Hamish M. Scott, *Enlightened Absolutism* (University of Michigan, 1990).

⁴ For the following, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 511, 521-22, 565-720; *Enlightenment Contested*, pp. 205-210, 344-405, 699-871; Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 1-232, and *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism* (Humanities, 1984); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (W.W. Norton, 1966), pp. 168-171; *The Science of Freedom* (W.W. Norton, 1969), pp. 555-568.

State oppression? Indeed it did. Still, that which made it politically attractive to Madison---as to Voltaire---was the *practical* effect that toleration had on organized religion in a country like the United States. For freedom of religion in America guaranteed a “war of all against all” among innumerable denominations making it impossible for any single faith to take effective charge of the central public authority and guide it according to its wishes. In other words, this seemingly liberating concept condemned organized Christian religions to continuous, debilitating, sectarian conflict and consequent public impotence. Under such conditions, the more materialist minded members of the Whig oligarchy concerned primarily about the peace and quiet needed to expand wealth without the interference of an overly moralizing Church could continue to thrive.

The bulwark of checks and balances

Division of governmental powers providing checks and balances against arbitrary acts emerged as an historical reality out of the English experience from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The roles played by the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches of the government had to be accepted to avoid civil war and assure tranquility. But a side effect of this acceptance was a semi-paralysis of government requiring the limitation of the scope of public authority. This created a vacuum in which private groups and individuals could thrive more freely--and potentially act more arbitrarily---than under the Stuarts. An American government of checks and balances therefore provided yet another bulwark for the survival and growth of the liberty of the existing propertied colonial oligarchy.

Problems – diverse immigration

Nevertheless, two problems faced the Founders and their successors, the first of which was the ever-weakening British character of the United States. Mass migrations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ensured the arrival of a kaleidoscope of different ethnic groups and new religious and cultural configurations. These did not necessarily share the moderate Enlightenment’s “common sense” passion for a social peace protecting individual economic freedom. But Madison, in discussing the benefits of the American Constitution in the *Federalist Papers*, had emphasized the ability of the new federal machinery to deal with the disruption such change might cause. For should imbalances appear, the new system combined religious liberty, checks and balances, and the anti-authority, anti-society ethos permeating the Calvinist vision to break down communities and “multiply factions” within them. It thereby continued to foment the war of all against all that might hopefully prevent domination by any new organized force—religious or otherwise.⁵

Problems – radical individualism

A second problem that the Founders and their successors had to confront was more troublesome: the continued influence within the schizophrenic British heritage of a radical, boat-rocking individualism working logically to break down both a “common sense Christianity” and the power of the existing propertied oligarchy.⁶ Radical individualism was always a logical option for Calvinists who lost their faith and found themselves left with nothing other than belief in an atomistic human

⁵ *The Federalist* (Many editions), X.

⁶ For the following, see Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 1-232; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 117, 265-270, 356, 372, 468-469, 563-720; *Enlightenment Contested*, pp. 51-60, 84-85, 135-163, 205-239, 295-405, 344-345, 363, 453, 515- 527, 699-871; C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Viking, 1972); Mayeur, IX, 157-206, 438-466, 956-1169; X, 179-298, 479-538; Gay, *Modern Paganism*, pp. 256-419; *Science of Freedom*, pp. 126-215, 400-401, 497-552.

existence in a depraved, jungle-like universe. Moreover, acceptance of the moderate Enlightenment vision itself led believers gently and gradually to abandon their Christianity. The Newtonian science that this vision baptized did not really need a personal divinity to exist, and the “mysteries” of nature that proved to its promoters the presence of the hand of a creator God might be cleared up by further research---as Spinoza himself insisted that they would. Still more importantly, John Locke’s philosophy openly destroyed man’s ability to form those general rational concepts that underlay supposedly “obvious” moral “laws”, that emphasized the individual’s social responsibilities, and that promoted an understanding of the human person as something other than a bundle of irrational, willful passions in search of satisfaction.

Admittedly, such radical individualism could provide new grounds for the existing oligarchy to do whatever *it* chose to do to defend its private goods and evangelize for a purely property-focused use of freedom. But the propagation of an atomistic individualism could also allow other individuals outside the oligarchy, whether native or immigrant, to pursue *their* materialist goals. These might indeed still be economic in character, but they could also be ideological, and backed by new and unnatural communities---partisan factions---formed out of the debris of American society to promote the dreams of secular-minded zealots.

Chaos threatened

As this emphasis upon individual freedom progressed, it redefined what, exactly, “common sense” permitted the public order justifiably to do to limit personal liberty. For individuals shaped without the influence of Christian doctrine eventually thought differently about such matters than men who had been formed by Faith as well as Reason. The “common sense” that was supposed to do the basic work of ensuring respect for an unchanging moral code lost more and more substantive content once the belief system that had given men the real courage to treat their rational judgments with respect was exiled as hopelessly divisive and intrusive. A “common sense” shaped by radical individualism gradually discredited the very notion of “limitations”, breaking down entirely anyone’s ability to impose upon another person judgments regarding what was rational and irrational, right and wrong, just or unjust. Chaos threatened.

America – the universal, evangelical redemptive religion

Nevertheless, the countervailing Anglo-American passion for tranquility had by no means disappeared. A conservative “choice” to maintain a social order capable of restraining the consequences of a willful individual freedom manifested itself alongside the passion for personal liberty---and often in one and the same person. Those making this choice felt that America had to be saved for order and freedom together. A new belief system emphasizing the importance of both was required to achieve that goal. But this conservative work was accomplished through a *revolutionary* transformation of the United States from an ordinary nation into a universal, evangelical, redemptive religion.

Lincoln’s secular temples

America’s career as a redemptive religion began with the Pilgrim Fathers’ description of their flight from an evil Catholic Europe as one leading to the construction of a New Jerusalem that would serve as the light of the entire globe. Many Puritans who lost their faith in the Christian God transferred this religious conviction into a moderate Enlightenment vision, seeing God’s hand in the birth of the new American system. Abraham Lincoln added immeasurably to the divinizing process by emphasizing earlier calls for a “civil religion” that would underline the sacred character of the American experiment. Lincoln sought to enshrine the Founding Fathers and the nation’s foundation documents---the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution---in secular temples with eternal flames burning in their honor. His civil religion preached the message that through America,

God and the Founders had provided the “last, best hope of mankind” for both peaceful social order and individual freedom.⁷

The will of the strongest

Unfortunately, faith in America hid the fact that the order it established was one in which the most passionate and most willful individuals and factions had the advantage over anyone continuing to play by the supposedly unchanging common sense rules that the system nevertheless still claimed to defend. Peace and freedom were reconciled, but by means of ensuring the construction of a *pseudo-order* guaranteeing the victory of the strong over the weak. The will of the strongest---whose representatives could, of course, always change---thereby also came to interpret the will of the Founders, the “original intent” of the foundation “scriptures”, and, given the need to placate continuing American religious feeling, the will of God as well.

Uncovering the variety of contradictory influences behind this victory requires a complex doctrinal, philosophical, historical, sociological, and psychological study. “Truly free citizens” operating under American guidance were pressured to avoid such an investigation. Besides condemning it as a treasonously unpatriotic endeavor dangerous to the success of “the last, best hope of mankind”, spokesmen for the new civil religion also emphasized its intrinsic impracticality. For, once again, it was not through divisive spiritual and intellectual studies, but only through the pragmatic exploitation of material nature that social peace, the fruits of liberty, and the blessing of God Himself were to be obtained.⁸

The American foreign missions

A quantum leap in evangelization of this pragmatic American civil religion took place in the 1890's. The pronouncements of President Woodrow Wilson concerning the goals of the First World War in 1917 and 1918 made the reality of such evangelization abundantly clear to anyone who had failed to perceive its growth before that conflict. True, American spread of the message slowed in the 1920's and 1930's---due chiefly to a desire to purge it from any contamination that involvement with a war-torn, revolutionary---and impious---Europe might have entailed. But all that changed by the end of the Second World War, when Americans in general finally took the nation's evangelical role as practical guide of the universe as an unquestionable given, and prepared to bring the light into dark foreign caves.

By that time, many of the inhabitants of the prostrate Old World seemed to agree that America's message was irresistible. After all, victory, for most men, is a sufficient argument for quelling doubts regarding the superiority of any conqueror, whoever he might be. Besides, this American conqueror came with the enthusiastic support of its citizens---fervent Christians notable among them---and a reputation for ensuring order, liberty, and unbounded prosperity to “the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse yearning to be free”.

⁷ Marty, *Op. cit.*, pp. xiii, 154-164, 221-224, 280-284; William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion* (Pilgrim Press, 1959), pp. 9, 98, 116-120, 143-144, 152-159, 193-194; Paul F. Boller, Jr., *George Washington and Religion* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), pp. 66-115; Mayeur, *Op. cit.*, X, 479-538, XI, 853-932; Gay, *The Science of Freedom*, pp. 555-568.

⁸ See John Rao, “Why Catholics Cannot Defend Themselves”, in *The Remnant* (March 31, 2003); Also, the highly instructive Venetian republican precedent admired by Puritans, in William James Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty. Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter-Reformation* (California, 1968).

C. Catholics and American Pluralist Fideism

Moderate Enlightenment ideas had had an enormous influence in Catholic circles throughout the eighteenth century, convincing many political and religious leaders to abandon doctrinal quarrels and defend piety with reference to a supposedly common sense based Christian European moral inheritance instead.⁹ Nevertheless, Rome did not greet the birth of the American system as though it provided the universal answer to political and social turmoil. She was even less inclined to do so as her renewed concern for dogmatic rigor grew throughout the nineteenth century. Yes, the Holy See was clearly pleased with that lack of governmental restrictions on pastoral work guaranteed by the American Constitution. Nevertheless, the Papacy was too steeped in European problems, from radical revolution to liberal Culture Wars and theological Modernism, to place the long-term consideration of what was happening in the United States at the center of its concerns. But other clerics and laymen stepped in where the heirs of Peter were absent. And from the start, they intimated that the “last, best hope of mankind” offered pragmatic guidance for the resolution of religious as well as secular conundrums.¹⁰

Americanist advocates

Fr. Isaac Hecker (1819-1888), founder of the Paulist Fathers, preached, as his monument in New York says, a union of Catholicism and America that would provide “a future brighter than any past”. Prelates such as James Gibbons (1834-1921), John Ireland (1838-1918), John Keane (1839-1918), and Denis O’Connell (1849-1927) carried his message into the next generation and into the heart of the Old Continent herself, using the recently established Catholic University of America in Washington and the North American College in Rome as bases from which to do so. They cultivated close ties with the Republican Party and its more homogenous American clientele, while finding a sympathetic European audience for their arguments in supporters of Marc Sangnier’s (1873-1950) *Sillon* as they went about their work.

Critics of Americanism

Critics of what was then called “Americanism” were not lacking in those first years of its evangelical fervor. Three European professors at Catholic University of America in particular--- Msgr. Joseph Pohle, and Frs. Georges Périès and Joseph Schröder---began a substantive analysis of the message of this pragmatic “system to supplant all other systems”, expressing serious misgivings regarding its materialist consequences. Archbishop Satolli, the Apostolic Delegate, who lived on the grounds of Catholic University for some years in the 1890’s, shared their fears. Convinced by such men that something unpleasant was happening, but that the “pragmatic”, anti-intellectual bias of the American Way made it difficult for its supporters to understand its possible dogmatic errors, Pope Leo XIII condemned what was basically identified as a “possible heresy” in two encyclicals: *Longinquina oceani* (1895) and *Testem benevolentiae* (1899).

⁹ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, pp. 751-780; Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (Yale, 1996) pp. 234-248; Mayeur, X, 25-88, 179-215.

¹⁰ For the following, see Thomas McAvoy, *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History, 1895-1900* (Notre Dame University Press, 1957); Patrick H. Ahern, *The Catholic University of America, 1887-1896: The Rectorship of John J. Keane* (Catholic University Press, 1948) Colman James Barry, *The Catholic University of America, 1903-1909: The Rectorship of Denis J. O’Connell* (Catholic University Press, 1950); John Tracy Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, 1834-1921* (Bruce Publishing Company, 1952); Ornella Confessore, *L’americanismo cattolico in Italia* (Edizioni Studium, 1984); Mayeur, XI, 903-911; Marty, pp. 271- 294.

Catholic propagation of the pious American Way

Nevertheless, the work of this first wave of critics was broken off with the entry of the United States into the First World War and the discrediting of the very pronounced German-American role in their labors.¹¹ Intense instruction in the American civil religion characterized the interwar isolationist era. A Catholic community no longer fed by a floodtide of new immigrants took the Americanist teaching and its heroes much more to heart. By the time that a confident post Second World War America was ready to spread its message consistently and authoritatively, believers joined eagerly in proclamation of its benefits, emphasizing its *Catholic* as well as *secular* value. For imitation of the pious American Way was now propagated by them as the sole possible defense against atheistic communism, and, therefore, the obvious bulwark of the Church Universal.

Personalism and American Pluralism

Catholic confidence in Americanism was expressed most thoroughly by Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904-1967). But Jacques Maritain gave him powerful assistance in his labor, serving, in the process, as an intermediary with that variegated European “personalist” movement that saw the presence and voice of the Holy Spirit in diverse, vital, energetic “mystiques”, to which Catholics were called to “witness” and help bring to perfection. Maritain insisted that Americanism---or, rather, pluralism, to use the term under which the national message was to gain the universal post war significance that we are now examining---was the ideal tool for obtaining the ordered freedom that would guarantee expression of the messages of such manifold mystiques, and therefore satisfaction of the basic personalist goal.¹²

Both these forces together--- personalism and American pluralism---then shaped the deliberations and decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Personalism had the greater impact in providing the specific intellectual spirit behind the Council reforms; American pluralism in providing a *Zeitgeist* whose unquestioned presuppositions favored massive changes in all aspects of Catholic life--- doctrinal included---under the guise of adopting a purely pragmatic, “pastoral” methodology friendly to religion. The results were highly predictable---if only an analysis of the real situation in America had been undertaken. But this, of course, was the one thing that a “pragmatic” pluralist society and a pastoral-minded Church could not allow to be done---lest the *dogmas* underlying their activity be uncovered and arouse “divisive” disputes. In defense of the spirit of free intellectual inquiry, let us now make that essential but prohibited analysis.

D. Smiling as One Dies

Tempting Providence

The Council, following the American model, opted to avoid authoritative and potentially divisive doctrinal statements in favor of a pragmatic or pastoral treatment of the complex problems of the Church in the modern world. This approach of course presumed that there was a universally shared understanding of what the very words “pragmatic” and “pastoral” meant. Many

¹¹ Colman James Barry, *The Catholic Church and German Americans* (Catholic University Press, 1953); Marty, pp. 276-285.

¹² Mayeur, XII, 833-924; XIII, 55, 73, 76, 109, 169-379, 528-577; For personalism and its influence, see John Hellmann, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left* (McGill-Queens, 1981); *The Knight Monks of Vichy. Uriage, 1940-1945* (McGill-Queens, 1993); Julio Meinvielle, *De Lamennais a Maritain* (La Cité Catholique, 1956).

Catholic thinkers had long warned that anyone who tried to act pragmatically and pastorally without defining doctrinally what these terms---along with those of “peace” and “liberty”---signified was dragging a weak contemporary Church into a “free” co-existence and competition with immensely strong and willful enemies under conditions in which she was, humanly speaking, bound to lose. Such pragmatism would really amount to tempting Providence. The omnipotent God could indeed still protect the Church within a “free market place of ideas and life styles” where truth was accorded no privileged place amidst the riot of contemporary ideological commodities on its shelves. But He would do so only through the heroic courage and suffering of His faithful---not thanks to the merits of the pluralist “method” itself. The progress of that method guaranteed nothing less than religious and cultural suicide.¹³

Integration into a materialist conception of life

For, once again, the freedom and the order that American Catholics had obtained through the national civil religion were a “freedom” and an “order” based upon the peculiar and often quite contradictory Calvinist, moderate Enlightenment, and materialist Whig elements forming and mutually influencing American culture. Under their joint guidance, the Catholic discovered that his freedom was two-fold in character. On the one hand, it was the radical individualist freedom that secularized Puritans and anti-institutional Whigs of the moderate Enlightenment wished him to have---a freedom that “sounded Christian” because it was still so often praised in Protestant biblical language. On the other, it was a freedom that was not permitted to disturb the pragmatic, naturalist order preferred by moderate Enlightenment thinkers and oligarchs; a freedom that avoided “divisive thought”, and “integrated” its practitioner into a materialist conception of life.

Such liberty destroyed the freedom of communities. Any Church attempt to use her liberty to hold onto a Catholic social authority became an assault on *real* freedom. *True* liberty meant only the freedom given to individual believers to weaken communal ecclesiastical structures, to multiply factions in the Church’s midst, and to prevent her from having any serious impact in the public sphere. But a Church acting “pragmatically” in this kind of free society was destined to become nothing other than the powerless Catholic branch of the American Pluralist Church.

Reduced to introspective sterility

Moreover, even the liberty of *individual* Catholics was spiritually and intellectually impoverished and limited. This was due to the fact that their personal freedom of thought was separated from their personal freedom of action. Pluralism told them that they could think but not act, since any thought-based action could be divisive in our world of inevitable and growing diversity. Hence, it could never permit Christ to be King over the society in which the very heart, mind, and will of individuals were most effectively formed. In denying the crucial importance of their social environment for the shaping of their minds and souls; in forcing Catholics to construct a dike against all energetic action founded upon Reason as well as Faith, their thought and belief were both reduced to an introspective sterility. Vigorously pressed to avoid non-inclusive, divisive behavior in the public sphere, they were also simultaneously directed towards adoption of those purely materialist standards for human action deemed most “practical” by whatever strong willed naturalists happened to dominate society at the moment. And as this pluralist magisterium more and more guided every aspect of believers’ *external* life, it came to reshape, according to its dictates, their personal, *internal* understanding of the Catholic magisterium, essentially changing

¹³ See the critique of the editors of *La Civiltà Cattolica* in John Rao, *Removing the Blindfold* (Remnant Press, 1999), pp. 93-103, 160-184.

their appreciation of the practical demands of the Faith upon their daily lives in the process.

Although all these developments were obvious long before the 1960's, the concentration of the faithful in immigrant neighborhoods, maintained due to the economic and social inertia accompanying the Great Depression and the Second World War, kept a clear awareness of them hidden from most believers---and from Americans as a whole. But the post war world witnessed a massive movement of Catholics into multi-religious suburbs where acceptance or rejection of the pluralist civil religion gained much more immediate importance for all of the diverse groups composing American society.¹⁴ Then, when a "pastoral" minded Ecumenical Council and the meaning of its "spirit" were left to flounder in the "peaceful and free" environment shaped by the pluralist worldview, the floodgates were so loosened that even the blind began to see.

The Catholic branch of the American Pluralist Church

The consequence was that everything permitted by the pluralist magisterium sought *droit de cité* inside the Catholic Camp.¹⁵ American Church authorities showed their "openness" to this *novus ordo saeculorum* by showering with respect whatever had *not* been approved of or encouraged by Catholic doctrine and tradition in the past. Each "inclusive" action on their part required a new program, a different kind of education, a fresh alteration of the physical structure of a parish church, and a change in the liturgy to accommodate it. These changes always replaced something distinctly Catholic with ideas and symbols which were distinctly not Catholic. Predictably, however, insistence upon "openness" led to the domination of the Catholic branch of the American Pluralist Church by precisely those strong individuals and unnatural communities to which the nation had been inclined to give birth---namely, men and factions concerned with economic issues, sexual matters, and one form or another of America's evangelical mission of political and social liberation. True peace and freedom required an identification of Catholicism with whatever the strongest naturalist wills and lobbies in any given diocese or parish or religious order promoted.

The one unthinkable thought

Nevertheless, since such developments took place within a system whose Founders and institutions were said to protect Church liberty more effectively than ever before in history, any danger to the integrity of religion was deemed impossible. The one unthinkable thought was that there could be the slightest possible point of conflict between the "Catholic" mission of the Founders and the Foundation documents on the one hand, and the actual, historical Catholic Faith on the other. Church and State have thereby become united in the classical land of their separation as never before in history. Hence, mankind's "last, best hope" retains its undeserved image, its victims never learn of its poisons, and it can continue to wreak its all too predictable havoc again and again.¹⁶

¹⁴ On postwar Catholicism, see Mayeur, XII, 833-932; Marty, pp. 403-477.

¹⁵ For the following, see Rao, *Americanism*, and *Why Catholics Cannot Defend Themselves*.

¹⁶ So effective have these developments been that I literally must present the perennial Faith as an exotic new religion to my own university students, the vast majority of them raised in the Catholic school system. Almost all of them believe that "toleration" is the Church's chief dogma. Practically everyone inside and outside my classroom now praises the civil religion and its heroes as though they represent the essence of Catholicism and Catholic Action. The faithful give thanks to God at the Thanksgiving Mass for the providential rescue of the Pilgrim Fathers from religious oppression. They interpret St. Thomas Aquinas through the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. While denying the absolutely undeniable membership of many Founders in anti-Catholic Masonic lodges, they rejoice in a legendary appearance of the Blessed Mother to a George Washington and his totally fictitious conversion to the Faith on his deathbed.

The impact of the *Zeitgeist*

But how could this have happened without the aid of a “pluralist police force” tossing Catholics into the Gulag for their failure to comply with the civil religion and its dogmas?¹⁷ Some troubled believers---those who rejected certain Church teachings on faith and morals but still wished to retain the name “Catholic” due to sentimental attachment, self-interest, or pure illogic---found in pluralism an effective justification for their nuanced rebellion. After all, true American liberty demanded respect for courageous individual dissent from communal ecclesiastical authorities. And, once again, such liberty could not possibly harm the Church of Christ, because the American system, by definition, was “obviously” favorable to the cause of religion. However, the explanation for the pluralist conquest of most Catholics---both the original, bewildered, struggling, ignorant mass of immigrants as well as their wealthier, better-educated, but still overworked descendants---is much more simple. It came about through the impact of a *Zeitgeist* whose unquestionable givens were unceasingly taught by each and every tool in their social environment from birth to grave. Most American Catholics simply knew no serious arguments to ward off its effects. Yes, they understood quite well how to unmask the problems and contradictions of a *Zeigeist* that did not share the blessings of American order and freedom---that of medieval Christendom, for example. But they were utterly incapable of confronting the possible flaws of their own time and place.

Destroying what it claims to protect

Proponents of pluralism will object that the United States offers numerous examples of prominent prelates and laymen who regularly rise up in defense of Catholic principles opposed by secularist zealots. This is certainly true. Still, as noted above, such work is the product of heroic Catholic virtue exploiting that right to corporate organization and initiative that the moderate Anglo-American Enlightenment did not attack directly, as did its radical counterpart on the Continent. So long as Catholics did---and do---rely on the strength that comes from their religion and the firm exploitation of remaining rights to corporate organization they staved off---and can continue to stave off---the secularizing evils around them. But that is not the result of the pluralist system. The logic---and practice---of that system, along with that of the moderate Enlightenment and Protestant Pietist vision that produced it, is to emasculate and destroy the effectiveness of the religions and the communities that it claims to respect.

The black hole of constitutional machinery

Sadly, the logic of pluralism holds the vast majority of well-meaning Catholic “Defenders of the Faith” in its grip, ultimately rendering their praiseworthy activity tragically impotent. Emasculation is accomplished by drawing them away from *truly* pragmatic Catholic attacks on evil and inventive strategies for expressing opposition into the hopelessly debilitating work of “change” through the constitutional machinery of the system itself. This machinery, as *The Federalist* indicates, is a kind of black hole, filled with checks and balances precisely designed to avoid any change that is rejected by the dominant, willful elements in society. Taking its mechanisms seriously has allowed partisan forces eager for Catholic votes loudly to proclaim support for causes like that of the pro-life movement, while knowing full well either that they have no intention of fulfilling their promises, or that even if they did, and could gain some momentary victory through one branch of the government, another would soon intervene to undermine it.

¹⁷ For the following, see Rao, *Why Catholics Cannot Defend Themselves*.

The sacrifice of moral logic

But such “Defenders of the Faith” have generally rendered themselves absurdly illogical as well as impotent. As one good friend has noted, forces like the Republican Party have used their surface support for the “pro-life” cause as a kind of Maginot Line, lulling Catholics into the security of their camp only to help give encouragement to enemies attacking traditional Church teaching on other matters. Courageous Catholic pro-life activists thus end by allying themselves with libertarian proponents of an unjust global economic system and neo-conservative proponents of endless global wars against a “terrorism” that is often merely a valid protest against pluralist secularization and materialism. Catholics praise the party for its pro-life stance while it enthusiastically promotes a materialist, individualist value system creating precisely that sort of person who will want to have an abortion or fight an unjust conflict. All moral logic is sacrificed in the process.

Impotence the goal of ‘true pluralism’

In fact, Catholic apologists themselves resort to arguments suggested by a pragmatic pluralism eager to render Catholicism self-contradictory and self-destructive. The American cardinals who appeared before Congress to testify against abortion on demand in the immediate aftermath of Roe versus Wade insisted that they did so *not* as prelates of the Catholic Church---which any lobbyist eager for a real victory would have done---but merely as “any other individual citizens”. Appeals are regularly made to support from a “popular will” that not only could someday turn against Church teachings, but already has repeatedly done so. Worse still, attacks on Church teaching and freedom of action are parried by calls for a return to “true pluralism” and the “will of the Founding Fathers”. But the emasculation of the Catholic Church and the public impotence of her moral teachings *is* the goal of “true pluralism”. And the constant, repeated insistence on the need to return to the *will* of the Founders is itself indicative of the dangerously arbitrary character of eighteenth century political “choices” that only look better in comparison with more than two centuries of their inevitably detrimental consequences.

The index of prohibited topics

Let me hasten to note that there are American defenders of Catholic principles who do not fall prey to such temptations. Nevertheless, their ability to discuss any of the results of pluralism is severely limited by the influence upon their fellow believers of the civil religion’s index of prohibited topics. This, once again, one by one, dismisses all of the critical theological, philosophical, historical, psychological, and sociological tools necessary for uncovering the fraud as intrinsically dangerous to maintenance of a *pragmatic* civil order and a *practical* use of individual freedom. It condemns the very desire to use such tools as nothing other than a lack of “obvious common sense” on the part of fanatical and unrealistic critics. Such men merely disturb the peace and quiet of their neighbors as well as their fellow Catholics. And to what end? After all, had Catholics not “made it”, financially? Was a Catholic not elected President in 1960? What else *really* counted for *practical* free men in the temporal sphere?

Smothering dialogue

When serious defenders of Catholic Truth then take up that line of “pragmatic” argument and seek to demonstrate the long-term *practical* dangers of pluralism---and especially its creation of a *pseudo-order* in which the will of the strong dominates, making a mockery of those “rules” concerning integration and divisiveness that honest Catholic spirits actually take at face value and follow---the unquestionable “godliness” and innate goodness of the American Way are evoked to smother the dialogue. The apologist is now accused of lacking faith in its “obviously Christian” nature and mandate---even though this godliness is defined through the subjective *will* of the Founding Fathers and interpreted by the strongmen of the moment. Here our defenders of the

Faith are condemned for their cynical rejection of the God-given “last and best hope” for social peace and individual freedom; for their brazen lack of charity for suffering humanity.

The Inquisition of the Pluralist Magisterium

If such Catholics persist in their position and emphasize the fact that they are being subjected to an irrational attack, having been accused simultaneously of impracticality, naïveté, and faithless cynicism, the inquisition operating on behalf of the pluralist magisterium denounces them with all of the slogans at its disposal. That their questioning of the American Way makes them unpatriotic is an obvious given. As enemies of the sole path to peace and freedom they can also be censured as warmongers, as fascists, anti-Semites, fomenters of genocide, terrorists, or, barring this, as simple lunatics. Few Catholics have the stamina to reach this final stage of unsuccessful dialogue. And the hardy souls that possess the will to fight still longer find that the mercilessly materialist environment constructed by the pluralist system makes it difficult for them to continue. For that environment demands work and ever more work in order merely to survive. Even the strongest opponent, over time, will often be simply too exhausted to indulge the luxury of criticizing pluralism and the civil religion divinizing it in the few hours of repose left to him by them at the end of a burdensome day.

E. A Victorious American Model?

The Council’s “pastoral methodology” inevitably worked to break down the authority of the Church and redefine doctrine and tradition in line with the will of whatever forces were strongest in other nations as well as the United States.¹⁸ That “will” has become ever more libertine, criminal, and ideological in character, in both the Old World as well as the New. Predictably, this triumph of the will has taken place while proclaiming the simultaneous arrival of a new dawn of reason, liberty, and Catholic spirituality. And just as one might have supposed, the “pragmatic” and “pastoral” measures ensuring the reign of the willful have been backed by demands that they be treated as unquestionable, ironclad dogmas.

Choking a true inquiry

In a classic American pluralist fashion, strengthened all the more by its alliance with personalist rhetoric, this pastorally disastrous victory of irrational, passionate individuals and unnatural partisan communities is also said to represent the will of the Holy Spirit. Investigation of the truth of such a claim, and examination of anything else done at the Council or in its aftermath has been condemned as everything from naïve and impractical to cynical, faithless, and insane. The fideism of the pluralist methodology has predictably choked a true Catholic inquiry into what, exactly, has happened to the Church of Christ. Its devotees have demanded Catholic recitation of the usual slogans of the need for pragmatism, peace, openness, and freedom as an alternative to serious thought. They permit no evidence to be cited to understand the Council’s true authority or put it into historical perspective: not that offered by Church Fathers, nor previous ecumenical gatherings, nor the judgments of nearly two millennia of Popes, nor venerable canonical legislation. At best, they may allow one to lament ways in which “true pluralism” has been thwarted. But this, yet again, is what “true pluralism” requires, always and everywhere: religious and cultural suicide in the face of the triumph of the will.

Personalists active during the Council may have worked in alliance with supporters of the

¹⁸ See the theological and administrative problems discussed in Mayeur, XIII, 169-307, 509-656.

American system, but they actually preferred using the freedom it promised to support vital Marxist and Third World “mystiques” in constructing the post-conciliar Church. Such mystiques were favored because personalists did not directly advocate the radical individualism of the New World model and saw the hand of the Holy Spirit in strong, energetic communities instead. Still, personalists themselves carried the individualist revolutionary virus. They possessed that sense of special prophetic insight passed down to them from the Abbé de Lamennais, and expected to guide the vital movements to which they supposedly merely “gave witness”. Unfortunately, obstacles to their guiding role coming from Marxist apparatchiks and Third World dictators proved to be strong, and those emerging from Islamic, indigenous pagan, and parochial attachments of various kinds more powerful still.¹⁹

One empire of the world

Meanwhile, supporters of the American model were growing more self-confident. This was true of each of its civil theological “schools” of thought---conservative, liberal, neo-conservative, and libertarian---all of whom debated the precise nature of the pragmatic peace and freedom its dogmas provided. American pluralism had emasculated Catholicism, convincing the Universal Church that a “Catholic Moment”---to use the term of the Rev. John Neuhaus---that consisted in definitively adopting the principles of the moderate Enlightenment had finally arrived. It had converted Marxist apparatchiks to the service of a more successful form of materialism, finding them niches in multi-national and organized criminal enterprises. Now supporters of the American pluralist model became excited that a defeat of Islam would offer the chance to end all divisiveness and integrate everything into one peaceful, cultural “empire of the world”. The dawn of a day when no one would even remember that there was any other option than the liberating message of America lay close at hand. History was about to reach its conclusion.

Lacking the will to fight

There is no wonder, therefore, that contemporary personalists and their followers might, like others, renew their interest in the American model as one that does indeed more successfully tear out all remaining traditional Catholic roots. But that does not mean that they are obliged to give up their ideological goal of constructing strong, unnatural communities in the process of appealing to a system that has seemingly been obsessed with the victory of the *individual* materialist. For, as I have repeatedly stressed, the willful individuals who are freed by pluralism can and do include ideologues and their visions, whatever these might be. Indeed, it is precisely because the American model allows movements stirred by such prophetic individuals to gain strength that the ex-Trotskyite neo-conservatives committed to “permanent revolution” have supported it. Literally anything can happen in a pluralist dominated world, and a pluralist-dominated Church lacks the arguments, the authoritative prophetic spirit, and the will to fight whatever developments may take place. This truth will elude us, Richard Gawthorp notes, in tying Prussian Pietist statism with Anglo-American individualist Puritanism, “if we fail to focus on the Promethean lust for material power that serves as the deepest common drive behind all modern Western cultures”.²⁰

¹⁹ See Mayeur, XIII, 509-577; Émile Poulat, *Les prêtres-ouvriers* (Cerf, 1999), 244, 386, 408; Hellmann, *Knight Monks*, pp. 63-75, 213; Mounier, *passim*; John Rao, “The Bad Seed: The Liberal-Fascist Embrace and Its Post-Conciliar Consequences”, *Latin Mass Magazine*, Fall, 2001; “The Good War and the Rite War”, *Ibid.*, Spring, 2001.

²⁰ Richard Gawthorp., *Pietism and the Making of Eighteenth Century Prussia* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 284.

Imbibing the poisoned cocktail

Personalist “witnessing” to Marxism was a horrible thing. Nevertheless, the Marxist mystique was so patently fraudulent that it possessed a built-in self-destructive mechanism. If one compares it to a drink, it offered a beverage that contained a poison one could taste and therefore long to reject before it reached the point of destroying absolutely everyone who consumed it. “Diving into” American pluralism to bring its mystique to perfection is a different problem. A pluralist society looks familiar. Its continuing appeal to Christian language and its call for religious liberty makes it seem somehow traditional and pragmatically friendly. It offers a poisoned cocktail that does still have something of a pleasant taste to it and appears, for a while, to provide what it promises: tranquility and personal liberty. One does not realize, until the very moment that he reaches the bottom of the glass, that there is nothing really there, that the poison has done its job, and that one no longer possesses the strength to refuse yet another drink. The individual members of the desiccated, “free”, meaningless Catholic pluralist “Club” that the Church is reduced to under its aegis toast their oppressor as they are euthanized.

Call to the true, the good and the beautiful

The blindfold that submission to the American pluralist dogma lowers over Catholic eyes can only be removed by bringing believers face to face with the *complete* historical reality of Catholic Faith and civilization. Catholics need to be re-introduced to the fullness of individual and social life through the Incarnation, in the Mystical Body that St. Augustine called the "Whole Christ," so that its supernatural teaching and grace can burn off that blindfold by its own innate strength. Only in this way can the darkness of the pluralist caricature of peace and freedom be revealed for the lie that it really is: an insult to the human mind and soul, in their desire to learn to do what is true, good, and beautiful. Only a return to a *Catholic* pragmatism and pastoral methodology that defines itself on the basis of solid *Catholic* doctrine can free the Church and individual Catholics from a pragmatism and pastoral methodology that makes them smile as they die.