

Civic Virtue, Human Dignity and the Emerging Pluralist Global Civil Society

The fundamental fact of our contemporary global secular age is the irremediable condition of religious, ethical and cultural pluralism. In *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, the Council Fathers who had gathered from all corners of the globe in the first truly global ecumenical council began their reflections with the statement:

“In our time when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

Humanity forms but one community.” (*Nostra Aetate*, #1)

This fundamental moral reality of a single human community which the Catholic Church has always anticipated eschatologically has become a basic social fact in our contemporary global age, due to interrelated processes of increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness. It is the dual condition of forming, on the one hand, a single global human community, while being structured, on the other hand, through irremediable religious, ethical and cultural pluralism that characterizes our global secular age in a historically novel way.

To a certain extent the present condition and the moral challenges confronting Christians today have some similarities with the conditions in late Roman Antiquity that led St. Augustine to offer a Christian theological reformulation of two central Latin concepts, *religio* and *saeculum*, which eventually became two central constitutive categories of Western Christian civilization and have now become two equally constitutive categories of our common global secular age.

Originally, the Latin word *saeculum*, as in *per saecula saeculorum* only meant an indefinite period of time. But as first used by Augustine in a theological sense the “secular” referred to a temporal space between the present and the eschatological *parousia* in which both Christians and pagans could come together to pursue their common interests as a civil community.¹ It is precisely such a pluralist secular condition that requires the development of civic virtues shared by people with different worldviews, which will allow them to work together toward the common good. In this respect the Augustinian use of “secular” is at first very similar to the modern meaning of a secular civil and political sphere, that of the constitutional democratic state and that of the public sphere of a pluralist civil society, which should be in principle neutral with respect to all worldviews, religious as well as non-religious. Such a conception does not equate the secular with the “profane,” as the other of the “sacred,” nor is the secular the other of the “religious.” It is precisely a neutral space, in the sense of a universally open space that can be shared by all who live in a religiously pluralist or multicultural society, which by definition will have different and most likely competing conceptions of “the good,” as well as of what is “sacred” and what is “profane.”

¹ Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

The concept of civic virtue, as it emerged originally in the Greek *polis* or in republican Rome, and as it was rediscovered first in the Italian Renaissance and then again in the modern democratic republican tradition, presupposes a common civic solidarity grounded in the notions of shared citizenship and dedication to the common *res publica*. But the modern global secular condition and the kind of civic virtues it requires are significantly different from the condition of late antiquity in two respects. First of all, contemporary modern civic virtues need to be grounded in the sacred dignity of the human person and in the inalienable right to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, which it entails. Additionally, they need to be grounded in a transnational and transpolitical global human solidarity and be able to respond to the common and radically new challenges facing global humanity.

Augustine's theological reformulation of the Latin term *religio* was even more fateful than his reformulation of the term *saeculum*. In *De vera religione*, Augustine challenged Varro's tripartite division of religion into *theologia naturalis*, *theologia civilis*, and *theologia mythica* and incorporated what Ian Assman has called "the Mosaic distinction" between "true" religion and "false" idolatry, that is, between true "Christian" religion and false Roman superstition.² All Christian societies thereafter had been based until very recently on this fundamental "axial" distinction between "true" and "false" religion, or between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The Westphalian system of nation-states reinforced this principle territorially through the *etatist* formula, *cujus regio ejus religio*, that is, the religion of the ruler determines the religion of the subjects.

² Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

But the growing global acceptance of the two related modern principles, that of a non-confessional secular state which ceases privileging any national church or any particular religion and that of free and equal exercise of religion in society derived from the individual right to religious freedom, leads to a new reformulation of the traditional distinction between true and false religion. Without necessarily giving up their particular truth claims the present global condition forces each religion to enter into a process of mutual recognition of the respective truth claims of each and all religions based on principles of mutual respect and interreligious dialogue which is radically new.

It is this novel condition of *Nostra Aetate* that led the Council Fathers to assert that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (#2). In the final section of the declaration they draw the conclusion that “we cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God ... No foundation therefore remains, for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man, or people and people so far as their human dignity or the rights flowing from it are concerned” (#5).

Human dignity and the rights that flow from it should become accordingly the guiding principle of any ethical reflection, whether in the area of economic ethics, political ethics, or bio-ethics. Since the publication of John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, the modern discourse of human rights has been central to papal encyclicals and to episcopal pastoral letters throughout

the world. Papal pronouncements have consistently presented the protection of the human rights of every person, born and unborn, as the moral foundation of a just social and political order, the substitution of dialogue and peaceful negotiation for violent confrontation as the means of resolving conflicts and addressing just grievances between peoples and states, and universal human solidarity as the foundation for the construction of a just and fair national as well as international division of labor and a just and legitimate world order.

Furthermore, while earlier encyclicals were usually addressed to the Catholic faithful, beginning with *Pacem in Terris* the popes have tended to address their pronouncements to the entire world and to all peoples, fulfilling the traditional claim of the Bishop of Rome to speak *urbi et orbi*, to the city and to the globe. In fact the Catholic Church today is presenting its public interventions not as the defense of a particular group, Catholics, or of a particular moral tradition, Catholic Social Teachings, but on the basis of its moral obligation as a universal church to protect human life and the sacred dignity of the human person and to demand universal access to discourse, justice, and welfare in the name of global catholicity and human charity and solidarity. This means that whatever position or option it takes on any public moral issue, the church will need to justify it through open, public, rational discourse in the public sphere of civil society.

Let me offer an illustration of the novel type of Catholic moral reasoning from the 1986 Pastoral Letter of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*. It can be considered the most detailed, systematic, and thorough application of Catholic social thought to a concrete, particular economy. The bishops are justified in calling their letter “a work of careful inquiry, wide consultation, and prayerful discernment.” Two aspects of the pastoral

letter are particularly noteworthy. The first one is connected with the centrality of the principle of “the sacred dignity of the human person.” Indeed, one could almost say that it becomes the moral measure of all things. Accordingly, “every economic decision and institution” ought to be judged not only according to instrumental rational criteria but “in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.” Every economic system needs to be judged “by what it does *for* and *to* people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it.”³

One of the consequences of using such a criterion is that it frees Catholic social thought from ontological premises of natural law and from traditional conceptions of a natural social order. Catholic social thought can finally give up the old assumption of a Catholic “third way” between capitalism and socialism. There is no particular “Catholic” social order, neither a “Catholic” state, nor a “Catholic” economy, not even a “Catholic” family as a natural and universal type, valid for all times and places. Similarly, there are no “Catholic” solutions to social problems. There are only more or less humane solutions that protect most the human dignity of each and every human person. The moral Christian task, therefore, is to humanize all social structures to the greatest extent possible at any given circumstance.

But this means that solutions cannot be mandated, much less imposed from the outside. They can only be proposed for public debate, for experimentation, and for adoption after a public consensus has been reached. As the bishops point out, “there is certainly room for diversity of opinion in the Church and the U.S. society on *how* to protect the human dignity and economic rights

³ United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teachings and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997), pp. vi-viii.

of all our brothers and sisters. In our view, however, there can be no legitimate disagreement on the basic moral objectives.”⁴

It follows that generalized discourse can be the only appropriate procedure for reaching agreement on how best to protect those basic moral objectives. It is also obvious from the bishops’ argumentation that they derive both the requirement for government intervention and the preferential option for the poor precisely from the need to universalize equal access to moral discourse. Government has “the moral function” of “protecting human rights and securing basic justice for all members of the commonwealth.” This means that “those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for *all*.” The church’s “preferential option for the poor” in turn, “imposes a prophetic mandate to speak from them, to be a defender of the defenseless, who in biblical terms are the poor.”

A second noteworthy aspect of the pastoral letter is the historicist consideration of the American economy not as a particular instance of an objective and universal natural social order but, rather, as a moment in the unfinished historical project of human development which is inextricably linked with the mystery of God’s plans of salvation for humanity. The bishops present their letter as a contribution to a public debate over what they call “a New American Experiment.” They view the economic challenges of today in similar terms to the political challenges once confronting the “founding fathers.” “In order to create a new form of political democracy they were compelled to develop ways of thinking and political institutions that had never existed before.”⁵

⁴ *Economic Justice for All*, n. 84, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 21, p. ix.

Similarly, in order to complete what the bishops call “the unfinished business of the American experiment” and “to expand economic participation, broaden the sharing of economic power, and make economic decisions more accountable to the common good,” it will be necessary to take steps as daring as those taken by the nation’s founders when they created “structures of participation, mutual accountability, and widely distributed power to ensure the political rights and freedoms of all.”⁶ Ultimately, the relevance of the Pastoral Letter *Economic Justice for All* does not derive from the particular economic policies the bishops propose. Even if after public debate all the concrete proposals in the section “Selected Economic Policy Issues” were discarded for not being particularly useful, the relevance of the letter would still reside in the very proposal to extend public ethical discourse to the economic sphere.

This which is relevant at the level of the public sphere of every national civil society becomes even more relevant and urgent at the level of the public sphere of a still emerging global civil society. But here the challenges of the irremediable religious, ethical and cultural pluralism become even more obvious and daunting.

The contemporary final phase of globalization is the one in which the subjective conditions of reflexive universal human consciousness and the objective conditions of a modern global civilization based on the world capitalist system, the international political system and the modern scientific and technological revolutions have become aligned. In a sense, the contemporary phase of globalization is a continuation of the series of world-historical processes initiated by the age of discoveries and the European global colonial expansion. But there is a qualitative break in so far as contemporary processes of globalization cannot be understood

⁶ *Economic Justice for All*, n. 95, p. 22.

simply anymore as the global expansion of Western modernization, but need to be recognized as a new dynamic of pluralization of multiple modernities which are in many ways related with the pluralization of civilizations which emerged out of the axial age.⁷

From the perspective of religious evolution, what constitutes the truly novel aspect of the present global condition is precisely the fact that all religions can be reconstituted for the first time as de-territorialized global imagined communities, detached from the civilizational settings in which they have been traditionally embedded. Paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai's image of "modernity at large" one could say that the world religions, through the linking of electronic mass media and mass migration, are being reconstituted as de-territorialized global religions "at large."⁸ What is characteristically novel of the present global condition is the emerging dissociation of world religions, civilizational identities and geopolitical territories. Each world religion is being constituted on the global level through similar interrelated processes of particularistic differentiation, universalistic claims, and mutual recognition.

In this respect, as Roland Robertson has emphasized, universal particularism and particular universalism are intrinsically interrelated and inherent to processes of globalization.⁹ Each "world religion" claims its universal right to be unique and different, thus

⁷ On "the axial age," "axial civilizations," and "multiple modernities," cf. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) and Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁹ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992) and Roland Robertson and Joann Chirico, "Humanity, Globalization,

its particularism, while at the same time presenting itself globally as a universal path for all of humanity. Global denominationalism emerges through a process of mutual recognition of the particular and universal claims. What is at stake, ultimately, is the recognition of the irremediable plurality of universalisms and the multiplicity of modernities, namely, that every universalism and every modernity is particular and concrete. One could say that we are moving from a condition of competing particularist universalisms to a new condition of global denominational contextualism.

At the very same moment in which humanity becomes practically aware of its unity as a species and reflexively aware of sharing the same global historical present, it is being forced to look simultaneously back into its past and forward into its future. It must both come to terms with its natural evolutionary development and with the complex dynamics of its socio-cultural development and at the same time contemplate its uncertain and radically contingent futures. The old moral and religious traditions appear at first to be woefully inadequate to confront the radically new challenges derived from the ever accelerating pace of techno-scientific developments. Yet, without a serious reflection upon its socio-cultural evolution, humanity may not find the moral resources needed to confront its radically new scientific and technological challenges. As Robert Bellah has pointed out:

If, as I believe, we human beings are at least to some extent in charge of our own evolution, we are in a highly demanding situation... Even if we can speak of societies with normatively lower and higher levels of social learning capacity, we can never assume that there is anything inevitable about attaining the higher levels.

Worldwide Religious Resurgence: A Theoretical Explanation" *Sociological Analysis*, 46 (1985), pp. 219-42.

If we are going to talk about levels at all, as I am prepared to do, we must expect to find regress as well as progress and face the possibility that the human project may end in complete failure.¹⁰

Nuclear disaster has been ominously one of humanity's potential futures since the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. A halt to nuclear proliferation appears geopolitically more out of control than ever. To this global apprehension one must add the increasing awareness that ecological disaster at a planetary scale has become an even more realistic threat due to global warming and the relentless exploitation of our natural environment. But, in principle at least, both catastrophes could be averted if global humanity finds the right combination of reflexive solidaristic consciousness, moral and political resolve, scientific-technological creativity and a greater recognition of our irremediable cultural (and religious) diversity in order to make what appear to be the more intelligent and rational choices. Pragmatically, of course, we also know how difficult it is for individual and groups to forgo their own particularistic self-interest for the sake of the common good, even when collective survival is at stake.

The ongoing sacralization of humanity which is part and parcel of the process of globalization is not enough.¹¹ Perhaps nothing sort of a new re-sacralization of nature and of the earth will be sufficient if we are to change our ways in order to face responsibly the impending ecological crisis. In this context, new *Gaia* and greener creationist theologies are going to be needed. But until

¹⁰ Robert Bellah. "The Renouncers" (<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/08/11/the-renouncers/>).

¹¹ José Casanova, "The Sacralization of the Humanum: A Theology for a Global Age," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 13:1 (Fall 1999), pp. 21-40.

now the Judeo-Christian tradition with its anthropocentric calling to subdue and master the earth and all living creatures has been more part of the problem than of the solution. All of humanity will need to draw on the religious resources of all the non-Western religious traditions if we are to develop a more reverential attitude towards animate nature. The *gaia* principle should teach us that there is no such a thing as inanimate nature, that the spirit of creation dwells everywhere.

But perhaps the more difficult dilemma, in the long term, is going to be how we as a species learn to use morally, creatively, responsibly, and self-limitedly the tremendous demiurgic powers unleashed by the new breakthroughs in biogenetics and by the new cognitive sciences of the brain/mind. The tragic paradox of the new and vociferous scientific materialist neo-Darwinism could be revealed in the humanist temptation or *hubris* to abandon the monotonous insistence on a blind, random, merciless, and meaningless process of natural selection for the sake of a model of rational scientific “intelligent design” at the moment when humans or “transhumans” can assume the role of creator’s apprentice.

As humans we are facing a radical moral and religious predicament at a time when thanks to our cognitive scientific and technological achievements we have, on the one hand, the power to annihilate ourselves, to destroy our environment, or to usher into a new and uncharted phase of human evolution through demiurgic genetic and/or neurological intervention. Yet, on the other hand, we also have the serious responsibility to be receptive to the spirit of creation, to partake and be open to the process of unification and divinization of humanity, and to become intelligent collaborators in the unfinished work of creation.