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January 22, 2011

By Barry Bercier, A.A.

Faced with the nihilism, disorder and totalitarianism that seem the destination of Enlightenment progress, we can find ourselves longing, naturally enough, for a return to that from which the progress first started out. If for philosophic types like Leo Strauss “return” meant return to pre-Christian Greek philosophy, for Catholics there can be a strong desire to return to something like the order of Christendom. Even while willing to acknowledge the failings and extremes of that earlier time, still there was something so good, true and beautiful about it, something in its own way so entirely without parallel in the human story, that we can’t but be roused, some of us, to a sort of powerful spiritual nostalgia.

Gothic spires made visible the openness of their towns and cities to the divine realm above; kings and princes were anointed by popes and bishops, and ruled under the sign of the cross; universities, the many branches of learning, even philosophy, acknowledged theology as the “Queen of the sciences.” Art, music, literature, law, the demarcations of time and of the cosmos itself seemed to echo the revelatory call of God’s Word to the world, unifying everything and making it all a splendid, beautiful whole.

If there was poverty in Christendom, in the modern world there are great swaths of unspeakable need; if there was ignorance back then, in our time even in the midst of wealth and technology there are gaping abysses of ignorance and barbarity; if there was superstition, in our time there have been and still are wildly distorted ideas, ideologies that make whole nations and people act as if out of their minds; and if there were wars and injustice and violence then, no era in human history can match our own for its oceans of blood, and we can only wonder, if we dare, what terrors might be next. The modern intellectual reflex to dismiss Christendom represents more a defect in modernity than in Christendom.

On the other hand, it’s like that annoying bumper sticker: “I may be going slow, but I’m in front of you!” What’s in front of us, still up and running, still calling the shots, is modernity. Christendom gave up the ghost, apparently, some time ago, and the fact is that there was a defect in Christendom, a fatal incompleteness or mortal inclination which later thinkers smelled out and then exploited in their attacks on it. There is no going back and, furthermore, we ought not to try. The crosswinds of nostalgia only hinder our passage on the waters.

St. Paul tells the early Christians that they should obey their civil authorities and pray for them. And so should we as well. What limited tranquillity human beings can hope for in this life depends on the effective functioning of the political order. Anarchy allows for very great evils. For this reason Paul says that political authority comes from God himself.

But this is not to say that political authority can be identified simply with divine authority or even that political authority might not at times be at war with the authority of God, imposing not order but organized disorder worse than anarchy. But normally, and as a rule, we ought to obey and, even more than obey, we ought to do our part to uphold the political order and defend it from those who threaten it. Patriotism is a virtue that belongs to Christians as much as to anyone else. Nevertheless, the relationship between Christians and the various political orders among which they find themselves can never rise entirely above a deep ambiguity. The City of Man, to use Augustine's term, cannot reach to the status of the City of God. Politics is no more capable of perfection in its guidance of men than is nature itself, as the Scriptures reveal both politics and nature to be.

Aristotle says that man is "by nature a political animal," and that this natural fact establishes a measure of what man can and ought to be. Human perfection or happiness for the Greek philosophers meant the full flourishing of human nature, and that includes the full flourishing of the political nature of man. For Aristotle, the only dimension of man not fulfilled by his political perfection is his intellectual perfection. As political perfection means the achievement of perfect order in the political life of men together, what Plato calls "justice," so intellectual perfection means the achievement of perfect order in the mind, what the Greeks called "wisdom," the knowledge of the whole of human nature and the whole of nature simply, of the cosmos, its first principles and its parts. The achievement of the natural perfection of political order open to the intellectual perfection of the mind-- these together make for the highest good of man.

But in shocking contrast, for the Scriptures the pursuit of just exactly this goal is the most fundamental error of man, or rather, not error merely but his most fundamental sin and wrong-doing. Man cannot guide himself on the basis of his knowledge of nature, human or otherwise. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the middle of nature's garden, bears fruit that kills the man. It is not at all what it appears to be when he looks on it with longing. The man's erotic longing for the knowledge of nature, the longing for that knowledge as if it were his completion and happiness, is *in itself* the turning away from God. God's gift of himself in relationship with the man is the man's perfection, not nature or the knowledge of nature; God is man's perfection, not the clay out from which man was formed. Nature and all its wonders, beauties and charms are not the guide to man. On the contrary, man is to tame, restrain,

subdue and rule over them all, subordinating them to his life with God.

For the Scriptures, the political order does not represent the perfection of man but is the chief sign of his imperfection and wickedness. The builder of the first city is the firstborn man, Cain, who, to rule over his brother, killed him and then built a city to defend himself from other brothers who would kill him likewise. God grants no blessing to this city, although he does bestow on it a darkened authority; he himself lays down the fearsome law of sevenfold vengeance, meant in some measure to restrain human evil. The great empires that follow Cain's city—Babylon and Egypt most notable among them—with law and war quell violence, with fire and mathematics develop the arts; they lever up towers to the heavens, study the order of the heavenly cycles, claim knowledge of the whole, and so practice the great art of establishing themselves secure and right in the world without God. They worship only themselves, their works and ideas, and they oppress everyone within them. It's not a happy picture.

But even in Egypt there was the Land of Goshen where God's People were allowed to keep their flocks and herds and where they themselves could grow and increase greatly. Under the influence of Joseph, Egypt accommodated itself to the presence of the Hebrews, whom otherwise they abhorred.

It was to Pharaoh's advantage to accommodate Joseph and his brothers, but only for so long. The City of Man always comes back to what it is, even if for a time it accommodates the People of God.

The point I'm driving at here, with some difficulty, is that for all the differences between the conditions of the Hebrews in Egypt or Babylon and the conditions of Christians in the Christendom of Rome, the political animal does not change its spots. Politics belongs to nature and nature is fallen. Rome accommodated itself to Christianity, but only so much and only for so long. The political animal in it did not change its spots; it bided its time.

Rulers strive for the exercise of real sovereignty. They cannot help but make claim to the knowledge of good and evil and of justice. They seek to render their rule legitimate by referring to divine origins or cosmic divinities or the nature of things one way or another, to substantiate their claims to knowledge. In Christendom they invoked the God of the Bible, ruled in the name of Christ and made claim to the approval not merely of nature but even of supernatural things.

But if some saints and theologians had a sense of what the supernatural really is, and lived even in their public lives a way of life that was sacramental to its core and beyond the boundaries of politics, the driving and defining instincts of politicians are not sacramental and their concerns are not supernatural. They are merely natural. It is nature that is at play. Sacred history and the apocalyptic vision of the Kingdom of God in its coming upon the City of Man must recede from view if there is to be political accommodation. The discreet concealment of the apocalyptic fact is the price paid for accommodation. From the view point of politics it is as from the viewpoint of those at the foot of Sinai—the supernatural, the apocalyptic, the sacramental are obscured, enter the cloud, or are veiled beneath the liturgical tabernacle made by human hands. Medieval cosmology as it operated in the minds of political men and ordinary folk is not Scriptural. It is pagan, the cosmology of “the nations.” It is a lapse backward from the Scriptural vision of creation, a fall back into the pre-Christian, non-Hebrew understanding of nature as an intelligible whole, as something knowable precisely because it is a whole and is always and everywhere the same, the chief point of reference by which man in the world orients himself, discerns good and evil, and rules.

The Moderns, with motivations of a very problematic sort and using methods that bar the way to wisdom, nevertheless were stunningly successful in their efforts to uncover the deep inadequacies of the classical conception of nature. Modern science persuades us that nature is not intelligible in itself but is disturbingly indeterminate, that it is not always and everywhere the same but unfolds across time, that the species are not eternal but evolve, that man and his earth are not the physical center of a comprehensible cosmic whole but are adrift in a mere vastness, a chaos receding into lightless imponderables beyond empirical and even mathematical reach. The moderns destroyed the cosmological view on which Christendom rested in its accommodation with Christianity. For those who relied on that cosmology in their understanding of the faith, it seemed that either reason had betrayed them and was now enemy to faith, or else, more radically still, that God was effectively dead and that faith, after all, had been the enemy.

But if a claim to an understanding of one’s world as some sort of objective whole is necessary for politics, no such necessity adheres to the faith. If it is necessary that there be politics to impose order and to rule over men in their fallen condition, faith is the return of men to their God, and man in relation to God does not require the direction of a law directed to otherwise lawless men. The order that comes from faith transcends altogether the order invented and imposed by politics. For the man of faith, nature is backdrop or setting, infrastructure, instrument and resplendent sign, but not horizon, not guide and not goal. Nature does not impose its order on man; nature in its inherent incompleteness looks to man to be raised up to its own proper perfection as support to man in his covenantal bond with God. Nature is not the whole within which man is to find himself; nature is made whole in man who finds himself taken up in the God-with-us, incarnate in his Anointed.

Aristotle's concept of nature was never sufficient to the self-understanding of Christianity. The creation as pictured in the stories of the first chapters of Genesis is a grounds sufficient as backdrop or setting, infrastructure and instrument for the life of man in covenantal relation to his Creator and so for the self-understanding of both Judaism and Christianity. It is, furthermore, immune to the criticisms of modern science directed to the classical concepts of nature and to their medieval progeny. As the story in Genesis presents it, no evident necessity governs the choice of the species created. The lighted clearing opened up for man's dwelling is neither necessary nor eternal nor always and everywhere the same. Without God's command, it would collapse back upon itself and be gone, as was nearly the case in the Flood. The dome of the heavens separates the waters above from those below but no indication is given as to its whereabouts in the dark vastness of the surrounding waters which recede into hiddenness. *Ha-olam*, "the world" in Hebrew, implies not an intelligible whole but in its root suggests hiddenness.

Because the creation account is a representation of the rule of God, as such and in its very structure it provides no cosmic backing for the political claims of men, no vision of the whole by which man might rule himself; it provides therefore no political remedy to the sort of political dilemmas into which modernity has brought us. On the contrary, it leaves the Christian stripped naked politically, before the power of modern regimes. The Christian whose Christendom has fallen stands before Modernity as the Jew whose Jerusalem and Temple had fallen stood before Rome.

The Jews call it *galut*, a word meaning exile but close to the root meaning laid bare, revealed. Such exile can be experienced as loss and cause for longing or nostalgia, or as punishment and cause for repentance, *teshuva* and return. But it is also *revelation*, a renewed self-revelation of God to his creation and to his Chosen, an *apocalypse* made possible when the veil of politics is lifted away.