A CATHOLIC MODERNITY?

Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture

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WITH RESPONSES BY

WILLIAM M. SHEA

ROSEMARY LULING HAUGHTON

GEORGE MARSDEN

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

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JAMES L. HEFT, S.M.

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I

A Catholic Modernity?

CHARLES TAYLOR

(The following lecture was given at the University of Dayton on the occasion of the presentation of the Marianist Award to Charles Taylor, January 25, 1996.)

I want to say first how deeply honored I am to have been chosen as this year's recipient of the Marianist Award. I am very grateful to the University of Dayton, not only for their recognition of my work but also for this chance to raise with you today some issues that have been at the center of my concern for decades. They have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them this afternoon, because of the nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it, anyway), which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments. I am very glad of the chance to open out with you some of the questions that surround the notion of a Catholic modernity.

I

My title could have been reversed; I could have called this talk "A Modern Catholicism?" But such is the force of this adjective *mod-*

ern in our culture that one might immediately get the sense that the object of my search was a new, better, higher Catholicism, meant to replace all those outmoded varieties that clutter up our past. But to search for this would be to chase a chimera, a monster that cannot exist in the nature of things.

It cannot exist because of what 'catholicism' means, at least to me. So I'll start by saying a word about that. "Go ye and teach all nations." How to understand this injunction? The easy way, the one in which it has all too often been taken, has been to take the global worldview of us who are Christians and strive to make over other nations and cultures to fit it. But this violates one of the basic demands of Catholicism. I want to take the original word *katholou* in two related senses, comprising both universality and wholeness; one might say universality through wholeness.

Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness. This is the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone, that their complementarity is essential, rather than of beings who come to accept that they are ultimately identical. Or perhaps we might put it: complementarity and identity will both be part of our ultimate oneness. Our great historical temptation has been to forget the complementarity, to go straight for the sameness, making as many people as possible into "good Catholics"—and in the process failing of catholicity: failing of catholicity, because failing wholeness; unity bought at the price of suppressing something of the diversity in the humanity that God created; unity of the part masquerading as the whole. It is universality without wholeness, and so not true Catholicism.

This unity-across-difference, as against unity-through-identity, seems the only possibility for us, not just because of the diversity among humans, starting with the difference between men and women and ramifying outward. It's not just that the human material, with which God's life is to be interwoven, imposes this formula as a kind of second-best solution to sameness. Nor is it just because any unity between humans and God would have to be one across (immense) difference. But it seems that the life of God itself, understood as trinitarian, is already a oneness of this kind. Human diversity is part of the way in which we are made in the image of God.

So a Catholic principle, if I can put it in this perhaps overrigid way, is no widening of the faith without an increase in the variety of devotions and spiritualities and liturgical forms and responses to Incarnation. This is a demand which we in the Catholic Church have often failed to respect but which we have also often tried to live up to; I'm thinking, for instance, of the great Jesuit missions in China and India at the beginning of the modern era.

The advantage for us moderns is that, living in the wake of so many varied forms of Christian life, we have this vast field of spiritualities already there before us with which to compensate for our own narrowness, to remind us of all that we need to complement our own partiality, on our road to wholeness—which is why I'm chary of the possible resonance of "a modern Catholicism," with the potential echoes of triumphalism and self-sufficiency residing in the adjective (added to those which have often enough resided in the noun!).

The point is not to be a "modern Catholic," if by this we (perhaps semiconsciously and surreptitiously) begin to see ourselves as the ultimate "compleat Catholics," summing up and going beyond our less advantaged ancestors[1] (a powerful connotation that hangs over the word *modern* in much contemporary use). Rather, the point is, taking our modern civilization for another of those great cultural forms that have come and gone in human history, to see what it means to be a Christian here, to find our authentic voice in the eventual Catholic chorus, to try to do for our time and place what Matteo Ricci was striving to do four centuries ago in China.

I realize how strange, even outlandish, it seems to take Matteo Ricci and the great Jesuit experiment in China as our model here. It seems impossible to take this kind of stance toward our time, for two opposite reasons. First, we are too close to it. This is still, in many respects, a Christian civilization; at least, it is a society with many churchgoers. How can we start from the outsider's standpoint that was inevitably Ricci's?

But second, immediately after we say this, we are reminded of all those facets of modern thought and culture that strive to define Christian faith as the other, as what needs to be overcome and set firmly in the past, if Enlightenment, liberalism, humanism is to

flourish. With this in mind, it's not hard to feel like an outsider. But just for this reason, the Ricci project can seem totally inappropriate. He faced another civilization, one built largely in ignorance of the Judeo-Christian revelation, so the question could arise how to adapt this latter to these new addressees. But to see modernity under its non-Christian aspect is generally to see it as anti-Christian, as deliberately excluding the Christian kerygma. And how can you adapt your message to its negation?

So the Ricci project in relation to our own time looks strange for two seemingly incompatible reasons. On one hand, we feel already at home here, in this civilization which has issued from Christendom, so what do we need to strive further to understand? On the other hand, whatever is foreign to Christianity seems to involve a rejection of it, so how can we envisage accommodating? Put in other terms, the Ricci project involves the difficult task of making new discriminations: what in the culture represents a valid human difference, and what is incompatible with Christian faith? The celebrated debate about the Chinese rites turned on this issue. But it seems that, for modernity, things are already neatly sorted out: whatever is in continuity with our past is legitimate Christian culture, and the novel, secularist twist to things is simply incompatible. No further inquiry seems necessary.

Now I think that this double reaction, which we are easily tempted to go along with, is quite wrong. The view I'd like to defend, if I can put it in a nutshell, is that in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel. The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom. In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development.

For instance, modern liberal political culture is characterized by an affirmation of universal human rights—to life, freedom, citizenship, self-realization—which are seen as radically unconditional; that is, they are not dependent on such things as gender, cultural belonging, civilizational development, or religious allegiance, which always limited them in the past. As long as we were living

within the terms of Christendom—that is, of a civilization where the structures, institutions, and culture were all supposed to reflect the Christian nature of the society (even in the nondenominational form in which this was understood in the early United States)—we could never have attained this radical unconditionality. It is difficult for a "Christian" society, in this sense, to accept full equality of rights for atheists, for people of a quite alien religion, or for those who violate what seems to be the Christian moral code (e.g., homosexuals).

This is not because having Christian faith as such makes you narrow or intolerant, as many militant unbelievers say. We have our share of bigots and zealots, to be sure, but we are far from alone in this. The record of certain forms of militant atheism in this century is far from reassuring. No, the impossibility I was arguing for doesn't lie in Christian faith itself but in the project of Christendom: the attempt to marry the faith with a form of culture and a mode of society. There is something noble in the attempt; indeed, it is inspired by the very logic of Incarnation I mentioned previously, whereby it strives to be interwoven more and more in human life. But as a project to be realized in history, it is ultimately doomed to frustration and even threatens to turn into its opposite.

That's because human society in history inevitably involves coercion (as political society, at least, but also in other ways); it involves the pressure of conformity; it involves inescapably some confiscation of the highest ideals for narrow interests, and a host of other imperfections. There can never be a total fusion of the faith and any particular society, and the attempt to achieve it is dangerous for the faith. Something of this kind has been recognized from the beginning of Christianity in the distinction between church and state. The various constructions of Christendom since then could be seen unkindly as attempts post-Constantine to bring Christianity closer to other, prevalent forms of religion, where the sacred was bound up with and supported the political order. A lot more can be said for the project of Christendom than this unfavorable judgment allows. Nevertheless, this project at its best sails very close to the wind and is in constant danger of turning into a parodic denial of itself.

Thus, to say that the fullness of rights culture couldn't have come about under Christendom is not to point to a special weakness of Christian faith. Indeed, the attempt to put some secular

philosophy in the place of the faith—Jacobinism, Marxism—has scarcely led to better results (in some cases, spectacularly worse). This culture has flourished where the casing of Christendom has been broken open and where no other single philosophy has taken its place, but the public sphere has remained the locus of competing ultimate visions.

I also make no assumption that modern rights culture is perfectly all right as it is. On the contrary, it has lots of problems. I hope to come to some of these later. But for all its drawbacks, it has produced something quite remarkable: the attempt to call political power to book against a yardstick of fundamental human requirements, universally applied. As the present pope has amply testified, it is impossible for the Christian conscience not to be moved by this.

This example illustrates the thesis I'm trying to argue here. Somewhere along the line of the last centuries, the Christian faith was attacked from within Christendom and dethroned. In some cases, it was gradually dethroned without being frontally attacked (largely in Protestant countries); but this displacement also often meant sidelining, rendering the faith irrelevant to great segments of modern life. In other cases, the confrontation was bitter, even violent; the dethroning followed long and vigorous attack (e.g., in France, in Spain, that is, largely in Catholic countries). In neither case is the development particularly comforting for Christian faith. Yet, we have to agree that it was this process that made possible what we now recognize as a great advance in the practical penetration of the gospel in human life.

Where does this leave us? Well, it's a humbling experience, but also a liberating one. The humbling side is that we are reminded by our more aggressive secularist colleagues: "It's lucky that the show is no longer being run by you card-carrying Christians, or we'd be back with the Inquisition." The liberating side comes when we recognize the truth in this (however exaggerated the formulation) and draw the appropriate conclusions. This kind of freedom, so much the fruit of the gospel, we have only when nobody (that is, no particular outlook) is running the show. So a vote of thanks to Voltaire and others for (not necessarily wittingly) showing us this and for allowing us to live the gospel in a purer way, free of that continual and often bloody forcing of conscience which was the sin and blight of all those "Christian" centuries. The gospel was always meant to stand out, unencumbered by arms. We have now been

able to return a little closer to this ideal—with a little help from our enemies.

Does acknowledging our debt mean that we have to fall silent? Not at all. This freedom, which is prized by so many different people for different reasons, also has its Christian meaning. It is, for instance, the freedom to come to God on one's own or, otherwise put, moved only by the Holy Spirit, whose barely audible voice will often be heard better when the loudspeakers of armed authority are silent.

That is true, but it may well be that Christians will feel reticent about articulating this meaning, lest they be seen as trying to take over again by giving the (authoritative) meaning. Here they may be doing a disservice to this freedom, and this for a reason they are far from alone in seeing but which they are often more likely to discern than their secularist compatriots.

The very fact that freedom has been well served by a situation in which no view is in charge—that it has therefore gained from the relative weakening of Christianity and from the absence of any other strong, transcendental outlook—can be seen to accredit the view that human life is better off without transcendental vision altogether. The development of modern freedom is then identified with the rise of an exclusive humanism—that is, one based exclusively on a notion of human flourishing, which recognizes no valid aim beyond this. The strong sense that continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself, is stamped as an illusion and judged to be a dangerous illusion because the peaceful coexistence of people in freedom has already been identified as the fruit of waning transcendental visions.

To a Christian, this outlook seems stifling. Do we really have to pay this price—a kind of spiritual lobotomy—to enjoy modern freedom? Well, no one can deny that religion generates dangerous passions, but that is far from being the whole story. Exclusive humanism also carries great dangers, which remain very underexplored in modern thought.

II

I want to look at some of these dangers here. In doing so, I will be offering my own interpretation of modern life and sensibilities.

All this is very much open to contestation, but we urgently need new perspectives in this domain—as it were, Ricci readings of modernity.

The first danger that threatens an exclusive humanism, which wipes out the transcendent beyond life, is that it provokes as reaction an immanent negation of life. Let me try to explain this a little better.

I have been speaking of the transcendent as being "beyond life." In doing this, I am trying to get at something that is essential not only in Christianity but also in a number of other faiths—for instance, in Buddhism. A fundamental idea enters these faiths in very different forms, an idea one might try to grasp in the claim that life isn't the whole story.

One way to take this expression is that it means something like: life goes on after death, there is a continuation, our lives don't totally end in our deaths. I don't mean to deny what is affirmed on this reading, but I want to take the expression here in a somewhat different (though undoubtedly related) sense.

What I mean is something more like: the point of things isn't exhausted by life, the fullness of life, even the goodness of life. This is not meant to be just a repudiation of egoism, the idea that the fullness of my life (and perhaps those of people I love) should be my only concern. Let us agree with John Stuart Mill that a full life must involve striving for the benefit of humankind. Then acknowledging the transcendent means seeing a point beyond that.

One form of this is the insight that we can find in suffering and death—not merely negation, the undoing of fullness and life, but also a place to affirm something that matters beyond life, on which life itself originally draws. The last clause seems to bring us back into the focus on life. It may be readily understandable, even within the purview of an exclusive humanism, how one could accept suffering and death in order to give life to others. On a certain view, that, too, has been part of the fullness of life. Acknowledging the transcendent involves something more. What matters beyond life doesn't matter just because it sustains life; otherwise, it wouldn't be "beyond life" in the meaning of the act. (For Christians, God wills human flourishing, but "thy will be done" doesn't reduce to "let human beings flourish.")

This is the way of putting it that goes most against the grain of contemporary Western civilization. There are other ways of framing it. One that goes back to the very beginning of Christianity is a redefinition of the term *life* to incorporate what I'm calling "beyond life": for instance, the New Testament evocations of "eternal life" and John 10:10, "abundant life."

Or we could put it a third way: acknowledging the transcendent means being called to a change of identity. Buddhism gives us an obvious reason to talk this way. The change here is quite radical, from self to "no self" (*anatta*). But Christian faith can be seen in the same terms: as calling for a radical decentering of the self, in relation with God. ("Thy will be done.") In the language of Abbé Henri Bremond in his magnificent study of French seventeenth-century spiritualities,[2] we can speak of "theocentrism." This way of putting it brings out a similar point to my first way, in that most conceptions of a flourishing life assume a stable identity, the self for whom flourishing can be defined.

So acknowledging the transcendent means aiming beyond life or opening yourself to a change in identity. But if you do this, where do you stand in regard to human flourishing? There is much division, confusion, and uncertainty about this. Historic religions have, in fact, combined concern for flourishing and transcendence in their normal practice. It has even been the rule that the supreme achievements of those who went beyond life have served to nourish the fullness of life of those who remain on this side of the barrier. Thus, prayers at the tombs of martyrs brought long life, health, and a whole host of good things for the Christian faithful; something of the same is true for the tombs of certain saints in Muslim lands, and in Theravada Buddhism, for example, the dedication of monks is turned, through blessings, amulets, and the like, to all the ordinary purposes of flourishing among the laity.

Over against this, there have recurrently been reformers in all religions who have considered this symbiotic, complementary relation between renunciation and flourishing to be a travesty. They insist on returning religion to its purity, and posit the goals of renunciation on their own as goals for everyone, disintricated from the pursuit of flourishing. Some are even moved to denigrate the latter pursuit altogether, to declare it unimportant or an obstacle to sanctity.

But this extreme stance runs athwart a very central thrust in some religions. Christianity and Buddhism will be my examples here. Renouncing—aiming beyond life—not only takes you away

but also brings you back to flourishing. In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation with God, God's will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called agape. In Buddhist terms, Enlightenment doesn't just turn you from the world; it also opens the flood-gates of *metta* (loving kindness) and *karuna* (compassion). There is the Theravada concept of the Paccekabuddha, concerned only for his own salvation, but he is ranked below the highest Buddha, who acts for the liberation of all beings.

Thus, outside the stance that accepts the complementary symbiosis of renunciation and flourishing, and beyond the stance of purity, there is a third, which I could call the stance of agape/*karuna*.

Enough has been said to bring out the conflict between modern culture and the transcendent. In fact, a powerful constitutive strand of modern Western spirituality is involved in an affirmation of life. It is perhaps evident in the contemporary concern to preserve life, to bring prosperity, and to reduce suffering worldwide, which is, I believe, without precedent in history.

This arises historically out of what I have called elsewhere[3] "the affirmation of ordinary life." What I was trying to gesture at with this term is the cultural revolution of the early modern period, which dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the citizen life and put the center of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production, and the family. It belongs to this spiritual outlook that our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, and foster prosperity. Concern above all for the "good life" smacked of pride, of self-absorption. Beyond that, it was inherently inegalitarian because the alleged "higher" activities could be carried out only by an elite minority, whereas rightly leading one's ordinary life was open to everyone. This is a moral temper to which it seems obvious that our major concern must be our dealings with others, injustice, and benevolence and that these dealings must be on a level of equality.

This affirmation, which constitutes a major component of our modern ethical outlook, was originally inspired by a mode of Christian piety. It exalted practical agape and was polemically directed against the pride, elitism, and, one might say, self-absorption of those who believed in "higher" activities or spiritualities.

Consider the Reformers' attack on the supposedly higher vocations of the monastic life. These vocations were meant to mark out

elite paths of superior dedication but were, in fact, deviations into pride and self-delusion. The really holy life for the Christian was within ordinary life itself, living in work and household in a Christian and worshipful manner.

There was an earthly—one might say earthy—critique of the allegedly higher here, which was then transposed and used as a secular critique of Christianity and, indeed, religion in general. Something of the same rhetorical stance adopted by Reformers against monks and nuns is taken up by secularists and unbelievers against Christian faith itself. This allegedly scorns the real, sensual, earthly human good for some purely imaginary higher end, the pursuit of which can lead only to the frustration of the real, earthly good and to suffering, mortification, repression, and so on. The motivations of those who espouse this higher path are thus, indeed, suspect. Pride, elitism, and the desire to dominate play a part in this story, too, along with fear and timidity (also present in the earlier Reformers' story, but less prominent).

In this critique, of course, religion is identified with the second, purist stance or else with a combination of this and the first "symbiotic" (usually labeled superstitious) stance. The third, the stance of agape/*karuna,* becomes invisible. That is because a transformed variant of it has, in fact, been assumed by the secularist critic.

Now one mustn't exaggerate. This outlook on religion is far from universal in our society. One might think that this is particularly true in the United States, with the high rates here of religious belief and practice. Yet, I want to claim that this whole way of understanding things has penetrated far more deeply and widely than simply card-carrying, village atheist–style secularists, that it also shapes the outlook of many people who see themselves as believers.

What do I mean by "this way of understanding"? Well, it is a climate of thought, a horizon of assumptions, more than a doctrine. That means that there will be some distortion in my attempt to lay it out in a set of propositions. But I'm going to do that anyway because there is no other way of characterizing it that I know.

Spelled out in propositions, it would read something like this: (1) that for us life, flourishing, and driving back the frontiers of death and suffering are of supreme value; (2) that this wasn't always so; it wasn't so for our ancestors, or for people in other earlier civilizations; (3) that one of the things that stopped it from being so in the past was precisely a sense, inculcated by religion, that there were

higher goals; and (4) that we have arrived at (1) by a critique and overcoming of (this kind of) religion.

We live in something analogous to a post-revolutionary climate. Revolutions generate the sense that they have won a great victory and identify the adversary in the previous régime. A post-revolutionary climate is extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of the *ancien régime* and sees backsliding even in relatively innocent concessions to generalized human preferences. Thus, Puritans saw the return of popery in any rituals, and Bolsheviks compulsively addressed people as Comrade, proscribing the ordinary appellation "Mister" and "Miss."

I would argue that a milder but very pervasive version of this kind of climate is widespread in our culture. To speak of aiming beyond life is to appear to undermine the supreme concern with life of our humanitarian, "civilized" world. It is to try to reverse the revolution and bring back the bad old order of priorities, in which life and happiness could be sacrificed on the altars of renunciation. Hence, even believers are often induced to redefine their faith in such a way as not to challenge the primacy of life.

My claim is that this climate, often unaccompanied by any formulated awareness of the underlying reasons, pervades our culture. It emerges, for instance, in the widespread inability to give any human meaning to suffering and death, other than as dangers and enemies to be avoided or combated. This inability is not just the failing of certain individuals; it is entrenched in many of our institutions and practices—for instance, the practice of medicine, which has great trouble understanding its own limits or conceiving of some natural term to human life.[4]

What gets lost, as always, in this post-revolutionary climate is the crucial nuance. Challenging the primacy can mean two things. It can mean trying to displace the saving of life and the avoidance of suffering from their rank as central concerns of policy, or it can mean making the claim, or at least opening the way for the insight, that more than life matters. These two are evidently not the same. It is not even true, as people might plausibly believe, that they are causally linked in the sense that making the second challenge "softens us up" and makes the first challenge easier. Indeed, I want to claim (and did in the concluding chapter of *Sources*) that the reverse is the case: that clinging to the primacy of life in the second

(let's call this the "metaphysical") sense is making it harder for us to affirm it wholeheartedly in the first (or practical) sense.

But I don't want to pursue this claim right now. I return to it later. The thesis I'm presenting here is that it is by virtue of its post-revolutionary climate that Western modernity is very inhospitable to the transcendent. This, of course, runs contrary to the mainline Enlightenment story, according to which religion has become less credible, thanks to the advance of science. There is, of course, something in this, but it isn't, in my view, the main story. More, to the extent that it is true—that is, that people interpret science and religion as being at loggerheads—it is often because of an already felt incompatibility at the moral level. It is this deeper level that I have been trying to explore here.

In other words, to oversimplify again, in Western modernity the obstacles to belief are primarily moral and spiritual, rather than epistemic. I am talking about the driving force here, rather than what is said in arguments in justification of unbelief.

III

But I am in danger of wandering from the main line of my argument. I have been painting a portrait of our age in order to be able to suggest that exclusive humanism has provoked, as it were, a revolt from within. Before I do this, let us pause to notice how in the secularist affirmation of ordinary life, just as with the positing of universal and unconditional rights, an undeniable prolongation of the gospel has been perplexingly linked with a denial of transcendence.

We live in an extraordinary moral culture, measured against the norm of human history, in which suffering and death, through famine, flood, earthquake, pestilence, or war, can awaken worldwide movements of sympathy and practical solidarity. Granted, of course, this is made possible by modern media and modes of transportation, not to mention surpluses. These shouldn't blind us to the importance of the cultural-moral change. The same media and means of transport don't awaken the same response everywhere; it is disproportionately strong in ex-Latin Christendom.

Let us grant also the distortions produced by media hype and

the media gazer's short attention span, the way dramatic pictures produce the strongest response, often relegating even needier cases to a zone of neglect from which only the cameras of CNN can rescue them. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is remarkable and, for the Christian conscience, inspiring. The age of Hiroshima and Auschwitz has also produced Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières.

The Christian roots of all this run deep. There was the extraordinary missionary effort of the Counter Reformation church, taken up later by the Protestant denominations. Then there were the mass-mobilization campaigns of the early nineteenth century: the antislavery movement in England, largely inspired and led by evangelicals; the parallel abolitionist movement in this country, also largely Christian inspired. Then this habit of mobilizing for the redress of injustice and the relief of suffering worldwide becomes part of our political culture. Somewhere along the road, this culture ceases to be simply Christian-inspired—although people of deep Christian faith continue to be important in today's movements. Moreover, it needed this breach with the culture of Christendom, as I argued before in connection with human rights, for the impulse of solidarity to transcend the frontier of Christendom itself.

So we see a phenomenon, of which the Christian conscience cannot but say "flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone" and which is paradoxically often seen by some of its most dedicated carriers as conditional on a denial of the transcendent. We return again to the point our argument was at some time ago, in which the Christian conscience experiences a mixture of humility and unease: the humility in realizing that the break with Christendom was necessary for this great extension of gospel-inspired actions; the unease in the sense that the denial of transcendence places this action under threat.

This brings us back to the main line of the argument. One such threat is what I am calling the immanent revolt. Of course, this is not something that can be demonstrated beyond doubt to those who don't see it, yet, from another perspective, it is just terribly obvious. I am going to offer a perspectival reading, and in the end we have to ask ourselves which perspective makes the most sense of human life.

Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though

there were nothing beyond—more, as though it weren't a crying need of the human heart to open that window, gaze, and then go beyond; as though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous worldview, bad conditioning, or, worse, some pathology. Two radically different perspectives on the human condition: who is right?

Well, who can make more sense of the life all of us are living? If we are right, then human beings have an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life. Denying this stifles. But then, even for those who accept the metaphysical primacy of life, this outlook will itself seem imprisoning.

Now there is a feature of modern culture that fits this perspective. This is the revolt from within unbelief, as it were, against the primacy of life—not now in the name of something beyond but really more just from a sense of being confined, diminished by the acknowledgment of this primacy. This has been an important stream in our culture, something woven into the inspiration of poets and writers—for example, Baudelaire (but was he entirely an unbeliever?) and Mallarmé. The most influential proponent of this kind of view is undoubtedly Nietzsche, and it is significant that the most important antihumanist thinkers of our time—for example, Foucault, Derrida, behind them, Bataille—all draw heavily on Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, of course, rebelled against the idea that our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering. He rejects this both metaphysically and practically. He rejects the egalitarianism underlying this whole affirmation of ordinary life. But his rebellion is, in a sense, also internal. Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion, and, indeed, does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation.

So this move remains within the modern affirmation of life, in a sense. There is nothing higher than the movement of life itself (the Will to Power). But it chafes at the benevolence, the universalism, the harmony, the order. It wants to rehabilitate destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed. Life properly understood also affirms death and destruction. To pretend otherwise is to try to restrict it, tame it, hem it in, deprive it of its highest manifestations, which are precisely what makes it something you can say yes to.

A religion of life that would proscribe death dealing, the inflic-

tion of suffering, is confining and demeaning. Nietzsche thinks of himself as having taken up some of the legacy of pre-Platonic and pre-Christian warrior ethics and their exaltation of courage, greatness, elite excellence. Modern life-affirming humanism breeds pusillanimity. This accusation frequently occurs in the culture of counter Enlightenment.

Of course, one of the fruits of this counterculture was Fascism—to which Nietzsche's influence was not entirely foreign, however true and valid is Walter Kaufman's refutation of the simple myth of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi. But in spite of this, the fascination with death and violence recurs, for example, in the interest in Bataille, shared by Derrida and Foucault. James Miller's book on Foucault shows the depths of this rebellion against "humanism" as a stifling, confining space one has to break out of.[5]

My point here is not to score off neo-Nietzscheanism as some kind of antechamber to Fascism. A secular humanist might want to do this, but my perspective is rather different. I see these connections as another manifestation of our (human) inability to be content simply with an affirmation of life.

The Nietzschean understanding of enhanced life, which can fully affirm itself, also in a sense takes us beyond life, and in this it is analogous with other, religious notions of enhanced life (like the New Testament's "eternal life"). But it takes us beyond by incorporating a fascination with the negation of life, with death and suffering. It doesn't acknowledge some supreme good beyond life and, in that sense, sees itself rightly as utterly antithetical to religion.

I am tempted to speculate further and suggest that the perennial human susceptibility to be fascinated by death and violence is at base a manifestation of our nature as *homo religiosus*. From the point of view of someone who acknowledges transcendence, it is one of the places this aspiration beyond most easily goes when it fails to take us there. This doesn't mean that religion and violence are simply alternatives. To the contrary, it has meant that most historical religion has been deeply intricated with violence, from human sacrifice to intercommunal massacres. Most historical religion remains only very imperfectly oriented to the beyond. The religious affinities of the cult of violence in its different forms are indeed palpable.

What it might mean, however, is that the only way to escape fully the draw toward violence lies somewhere in the turn to transcendence—that is, through the full-hearted love of some good beyond

life. A thesis of this kind has been put forward by René Girard, for whose work I have a great deal of sympathy, although I don't agree on the centrality he gives to the scapegoat phenomenon.[6]

On the perspective I'm developing here, no position can be set aside as simply devoid of insight. We could think of modern culture as the scene of a three-cornered, perhaps ultimately a four-cornered, battle. There are secular humanists, there are neo-Nietzscheans, and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life. Any pair can gang up against the third on some important issue. Neo-Nietzscheans and secular humanists together condemn religion and reject any good beyond life. But neo-Nietzscheans and acknowledgers of transcendence are together in their absence of surprise at the continued disappointments of secular humanism, and together also in the sense that its vision of life lacks a dimension. In a third lineup, secular humanists and believers come together in defending an idea of the human good against the antihumanism of Nietzsche's heirs.

A fourth party can be introduced to this field if we take account of the fact that the acknowledgers of transcendence are divided. Some think that the whole move to secular humanism was just a mistake, which needs to be undone. We need to return to an earlier view of things. Others, among which I place myself, think that the practical primacy of life has been a great gain for humankind and that there is some truth in the "revolutionary" story: this gain was, in fact, unlikely to come about without some breach with established religion. (We might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be too provocative a way of putting it.) But we nevertheless think that the metaphysical primacy of life is wrong and stifling and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy.

I have rather complicated the scene in the last paragraphs. Nevertheless, the simple lines sketched earlier still stand out, I believe. Both secular humanists and antihumanists concur in the revolutionary story; that is, they see us as having been liberated from the illusion of a good beyond life and thus enabled to affirm ourselves. This may take the form of an Enlightenment endorsement of benevolence and justice, or it may be the charter for the full affirmation of the will to power—or "the free play of the signifier," the aesthetics of the self, or whatever the current version is. But it remains within the same post-revolutionary climate.

For those fully within this climate, transcendence becomes all but invisible.

IV

The previous picture of modern culture, seen from one perspective, suggests a way in which the denial of transcendence can put in danger the most valuable gains of modernity, here the primacy of rights and the affirmation of life. This is, I repeat, one perspective among others; the issue is whether it makes more sense of what has been happening over the last two centuries than that of an exclusive, secular humanism. It seems very much to me that it does so.

I now want to take up this danger from another angle. I spoke before about an immanent revolt against the affirmation of life. Nietzsche has become an important figure in the articulation of this, a counterbelief to the modern philanthropy that strives to increase life and relieve suffering. But Nietzsche also articulated something equally disquieting: an acid account of the sources of this modern philanthropy, of the mainsprings of this compassion and sympathy that powers the impressive enterprises of modern solidarity.

Nietzsche's "genealogy" of modern universalism, of the concern for the relief of suffering, of "pity," will probably not convince any people who have the highest examples of Christian agape or Buddhist *karuna* before their eyes. But the question remains very much open as to whether this unflattering portrait doesn't capture the possible fate of a culture that has aimed higher than its moral sources can sustain.

This is the issue I raised very briefly in the last chapter of *Sources*. The more impressed one is with this colossal extension of a gospel ethic to a universal solidarity, to a concern for human beings on the other side of the globe whom we shall never meet or need as companions or compatriots—or, because that is not the ultimate difficult challenge, the more impressed we are at the sense of justice we can still feel for people we do have contact with and tend to dislike or despise, or at a willingness to help people who often seem to be the cause of their own suffering—the more we contemplate all this, the more surprise we can feel at people who generate the motivation to engage in these enterprises of solidarity, international philanthropy, or the modern welfare state or, to bring out the negative side, the less surprised we are when the motivation to keep these people going flags, as we see in the present hardening of feeling against the impoverished and disfavored in Western democracies.

We could put the matter this way: our age makes higher demands for solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before. Never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates. A similar point can be made, if we look at the other dimension of the affirmation of ordinary life, that concerned with universal justice. Here, too, we are asked to maintain standards of equality that cover wider and wider classes of people, bridge more and more kinds of difference, impinge more and more in our lives. How do we manage to do it?

Perhaps we don't manage all that well, and the interesting and important question might run: how could we manage to do it? But at least to get close to the answer to this, we should ask: how do we do as well as we do, which, after all, at first sight seems in these domains of solidarity and justice much better than in previous ages?

1. Performance to these standards has become part of what we understand as a decent, civilized human life. We live up to them to the extent that we do because we would be somewhat ashamed of ourselves if we didn't. They have become part of our self-image, our sense of our own worth. Alongside this, we feel a sense of satisfaction and superiority when we contemplate others—our ancestors or contemporary illiberal societies—who didn't or don't recognize them.

But we sense immediately how fragile this is as a motivation. It makes our philanthropy vulnerable to the shifting fashion of media attention and the various modes of feel-good hype. We throw ourselves into the cause of the month, raise funds for this famine, petition the government to intervene in that grisly civil war, and then forget all about it next month, when it drops off the CNN screen. A solidarity ultimately driven by the giver's own sense of moral superiority is a whimsical and fickle thing. We are far, in fact, from the universality and unconditionality which our moral outlook prescribes.

We might envisage getting beyond this by a more exigent sense of our own moral worth, one that would require more consistency,

a certain independence from fashion, and careful, informed attention to the real needs. This is part of what people working in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the field must feel, who correspondingly look down on us TV-image-driven givers, as we do on the lesser breeds who don't respond to this type of campaign at all.

2. But the most exigent, lofty sense of self-worth has limitations. I feel worthy in helping people, in giving without stint. But what is worthy about helping people? It's obvious; as humans, they have a certain dignity. My feelings of self-worth connect intellectually and emotionally with my sense of the worth of human beings. Here is where modern secular humanism is tempted to congratulate itself. In replacing the low and demeaning picture of human beings as depraved, inveterate sinners and in articulating the potential of human beings for goodness and greatness, humanism not only has given us the courage to act for reform but also explains why this philanthropic action is so immensely worthwhile. The higher the human potential, the greater the enterprise of realizing it and the more the carriers of this potential are worthy of our help in achieving it.

However, philanthropy and solidarity driven by a lofty humanism, just as that which was driven often by high religious ideals, has a Janus face. On one side, in the abstract, one is inspired to act. On the other, faced with the immense disappointments of actual human performance and with the myriad ways in which real, concrete human beings fall short of, ignore, parody, and betray this magnificent potential, one experiences a growing sense of anger and futility. Are these people really worthy objects of all these efforts? Perhaps in the face of all this stupid recalcitrance, it would not be a betrayal of human worth, or one's self-worth, to abandon them—or perhaps the best that can be done for them is to force them to shape up.

Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy—the love of the human—can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off or, worse, continues but is invested now with these new feelings, becoming progressively more coercive and inhumane. The history of despotic socialism (i.e., twentieth-century communism) is replete with this tragic turn, brilliantly foreseen by Dostoyevsky more than a hundred years ago ("Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism"[7]), and then repeated again and again with a fatal regularity, through one-party régimes on a macro level, to a host of "helping" institutions on a micro level from orphanages to boarding schools for aboriginals.

The ultimate stop on the line was reached by Elena Ceauşescu in her last recorded statement before her murder by the successor régime: that the Romanian people have shown themselves unworthy of the immense, untiring efforts of her husband on their behalf.

The tragic irony is that the higher the sense of potential, the more grievously do real people fall short and the more severe the turnaround that is inspired by the disappointment. A lofty humanism posits high standards of self-worth and a magnificent goal to strive toward. It inspires enterprises of great moment. But by this very token it encourages force, despotism, tutelage, ultimately contempt, and a certain ruthlessness in shaping refractory human material—oddly enough, the same horrors that Enlightenment critique picked up in societies and institutions dominated by religion, and for the same causes.

The difference of belief here is not crucial. Wherever action for high ideals is not tempered, controlled, and ultimately engulfed in an unconditional love of the beneficiaries, this ugly dialectic risks repetition. And, of course, just holding the appropriate religious beliefs is no guarantee that this will be so.

3. A third pattern of motivation, which we have seen repeatedly, this time occurs in the register of justice rather than benevolence. We have seen it with Jacobins and Bolsheviks and today with the politically correct left and the so-called Christian right. We fight against injustices that cry out to heaven for vengeance. We are moved by a flaming indignation against these: racism, oppression, sexism, or leftist attacks on the family or Christian faith. This indignation comes to be fueled by hatred for those who support and connive with these injustices, which, in turn, is fed by our sense of superiority that we are not like these instruments and accomplices of evil. Soon, we are blinded to the havoc we wreak around us. Our picture of the world has safely located all evil outside us. The very energy and hatred with which we combat evil prove its exteriority to us. We must never relent but, on the contrary, double our energy, vie with each other in indignation and denunciation.

Another tragic irony nests here. The stronger the sense of (often

correctly identified) injustice, the more powerfully this pattern can become entrenched. We become centers of hatred, generators of new modes of injustice on a greater scale, but we started with the most exquisite sense of wrong, the greatest passion for justice and equality and peace.

A Buddhist friend of mine from Thailand briefly visited the German Greens. He confessed to utter bewilderment. He thought he understood the goals of the party: peace between human beings and a stance of respect and friendship by humans toward nature. What astonished him was all the anger, the tone of denunciation and hatred toward the established parties. These people didn't seem to see that the first step toward their goal would have to involve stilling the anger and aggression in themselves. He couldn't understand what they were up to.

The blindness is typical of modern exclusive secular humanism. This modern humanism prides itself on having released energy for philanthropy and reform; by getting rid of "original sin," of a lowly and demeaning picture of human nature, it encourages us to reach high. Of course, there is some truth in this, but it is also terribly partial and terribly naive because it has never faced the questions I have been raising here: what can power this great effort at philanthropic reform? This humanism leaves us with our own high sense of self-worth to keep us from backsliding, a high notion of human worth to inspire us forward, and a flaming indignation against wrong and oppression to energize us. It cannot appreciate how problematic all of these are, how easily they can slide into something trivial, ugly, or downright dangerous and destructive.

A Nietzschean genealogist can have a field day here. Nothing gave Nietzsche greater satisfaction than showing how morality or spirituality is really powered by its direct opposite—for example, that the Christian aspiration to love is really motivated by the hatred of the weak for the strong. Whatever one thinks of this judgment on Christianity, it is clear that modern humanism is full of potential for such disconcerting reversals: from dedication to others to self-indulgent, feel-good responses, from a lofty sense of human dignity to control powered by contempt and hatred, from absolute freedom to absolute despotism, from a flaming desire to help the oppressed to an incandescent hatred for all those who stand in the way. And the higher the flight, the farther the potential fall.

Perhaps, after all, it's safer to have small goals rather than great

expectations and to be somewhat cynical about human potentiality from the start. This is undoubtedly so, but then one also risks not having the motivation to undertake great acts of solidarity and to combat great injustices. In the end, the question becomes a maximum one: how to have the greatest degree of philanthropic action with the minimum hope in mankind. A figure like Dr. Rieu in Camus' *La Peste* stands as a possible solution to this problem. But that is fiction. What is possible in real life?

I said earlier that just having appropriate beliefs is no solution to these dilemmas, and the transformation of high ideals into brutal practice was demonstrated lavishly in Christendom, well before modern humanism came on the scene. So is there a way out?

This cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith. But it is clear that Christian spirituality points to one. It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional—that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself—or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God. They obviously amount to the same thing. In either case, the love is not conditional on the worth realized in you just as an individual or even in what is realizable in you alone. That's because being made in the image of God, as a feature of each human being, is not something that can be characterized just by reference to this being alone. Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God's life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity.

Now, it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means, in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, most value in these times.

Can we try to take stock of the first leg of our strange Ricci-like journey into the present? The trip is obviously not complete. We have just looked at some facets of modernity: the espousal of universal and unconditional rights, the affirmation of life, universal justice and benevolence. Important as these are, there are plainly others—for instance, freedom and the ethic of authenticity,[8] to mention just two. Nor have I had time to examine other dark fea-

tures of modernity, such as its drive toward instrumental reason and control. But I think an examination of these other facets would show a similar pattern. So I'd like to try to define this more closely.

In a sense, our journey was a flop. Imitating Ricci would involve taking ourselves a distance from our time, feeling as strange in it as he felt as he was arriving in China. But what we saw as children of Christendom was, first, something terribly familiar—certain intimations of the gospel, carried to unprecedented lengths—and second, a flat negation of our faith, exclusive humanism. But still, like Ricci, we were bewildered. We had to struggle to make a discernment, as he did. He wanted to distinguish between those things in the new culture that came from the natural knowledge we all have of God and thus should be affirmed and extended, on one hand, and those practices that were distortions and would have to be changed, on the other. Similarly, we are challenged to a difficult discernment, trying to see what in modern culture reflects its furthering of the gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.

The point of my Ricci image is that this is not easy. The best way to try to achieve it is to take at least some relative distance, in history if not in geography. The danger is that we will not be sufficiently bewildered, that we think we have it all figured out from the start and know what to affirm and what to deny. We then can enter smoothly into the mainstream of a debate that is already going on in our society about the nature and value of modernity. As I have indicated,[9] this debate tends to become polarized between "boosters" and "knockers," who either condemn or affirm modernity en bloc, thus missing what is really at stake here, which is how to rescue admirable ideals from sliding into demeaning modes of realization.

From the Christian point of view, the corresponding error is to fall into one of two untenable positions: either we pick certain fruits of modernity, like human rights, and take them on board but then condemn the whole movement of thought and practice that underlies them, in particular the breakout from Christendom (in earlier variants, even the fruits were condemned), or, in reaction to this first position, we feel we have to go all the way with the boosters of modernity and become fellow travelers of exclusive humanism.

Better, I would argue, after initial (and, let's face it, still continuing) bewilderment, we would gradually find our voice from within the achievements of modernity, measure the humbling degree to

which some of the most impressive extensions of a gospel ethic depended on a breakaway from Christendom, and from within these gains try to make clearer to ourselves and others the tremendous dangers that arise in them. It is perhaps not an accident that the history of the twentieth century can be read either in a perspective of progress or in one of mounting horror. Perhaps it is not contingent that it is the century both of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and of Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières. As with Ricci, the gospel message to this time and society has to respond both to what in it already reflects the life of God and to the doors that have been closed against this life. And in the end, it is no easier for us than it was for Ricci to discern both correctly, even if for opposite reasons. Betwéen us twentieth-century Catholics, we have our own variants of the Chinese rites controversy. Let us pray that we do better this time.

Notes

1. This is not to say that we cannot claim in certain areas to have gained certain insights and settled certain questions that still troubled our ancestors. For instance, we are able to see the Inquisition clearly for the unevangelical horror that it was. But this doesn't exclude our having a lot to learn from earlier ages as well, even from people who also made the mistake of supporting the Inquisition.

2. Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentient religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: A. Colin, 1967–1968).

3. See *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chap. 13.

4. Cf. Daniel Callahan, *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995).

5. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

6. See René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972); and *Le Bouc Emissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

7. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Devils,* trans. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), 404.

8. Which I have discussed in *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1991); American edition: *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

9. Ibid.