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A journal for restless minds

Colloquī *: to discuss*

Walking Through Solid Walls

And other absurd social "science" fictions

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

Walking Through Solid Walls

And other absurd social "science" fictions

There is an absurd "science" fiction, peddled since the middle of the twentieth century—one could make a reasonable argument for much earlier—treating "God and heaven metaphorically as a far-off, future target at which we might take aim." This novel fiction "constitutes a break from the classical tradition, where 'God is present as creator in the world in a very profound and mysterious and intimate way' at all times." Inevitably, "God becomes an abstraction that we are free to think about in our leisure hours, but that we are also free to bracket out while we get on with most of our day-to-day living in the here and now." Such a distant God—a result of the Enlightenment according to Locke—thus gives us a way to have our autonomous cake and eat it too. It is the maddest of commentary that much of the West now shares a common understanding of truth, order, and reality *etsi Deus non daretur* ("as if God did not exist") which "asks us to think in terms of what remains true even if God isn't." This inevitably "allows us to bracket God out of our thinking about most of what's happening around us most of the time."¹

But, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) has argued, people should "reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment...and say: Even one who does not succeed in finding the way of accepting God should, nevertheless, seek to live and to direct his life *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God existed." At the same time, he warned—quite presciently, I must add—that we are indeed living in dangerous and opportunistic times. "During the past century man's possibilities and his dominion over matter grew by truly unthinkable measures. However, his power to dispose of the world has been such as to allow his capacity for destruction to reach dimensions which at times horrify us."

The fear that it [terrorism] might soon get a hold of nuclear or biological weapons is not unfounded and has made it necessary for lawful states to adopt internal security systems similar to those that previously existed only in dictatorships. The feeling remains, nevertheless, that, in reality, all these precautions are not enough, as a global control is neither possible nor desirable.

Less visible, but no less disquieting, are the possibilities of self-manipulation that man has acquired. He has plumbed the depths of being, has deciphered the components of the human being, and is now capable, so to speak, of constructing man himself, who thus no longer comes into the world as a gift of the Creator, but as a product of our action, a product that, therefore, can also be selected according to the exigencies established by ourselves.

Thus, the splendor of being an image of God no longer shines over man, which is what confers on him his dignity and inviolability, and he is left only to the power of his own human capacities. He is no more than the image of man of what man?

All this shows that the growth of our possibilities has not been matched by a comparable development of our moral energy. Moral strength has not grown together with the development of science; rather, it has diminished, because the technical mentality relegates morality to the subjective realm, while we have need, precisely, of a public morality, a morality that is able to respond to the threats that weigh down on the existence of us all. The real

and gravest danger in these times lies, precisely, in this imbalance between technical possibilities and moral energy.

The security we need as a precondition of our freedom and our dignity cannot come, in the last analysis, from technical systems of control, but can, specifically, spring only from man's moral strength: Whenever the latter is lacking or is insufficient, the power man has will be transformed increasingly into a power of destruction.

Over the last decades we have amply seen in our streets and squares how pacifism can deviate toward a destructive anarchism and terrorism. The political moralism of the 70s, the roots of which are anything but dead, was a moralism that succeeded in attracting even young people full of ideals. But it was a moralism with a mistaken direction, in as much as it was deprived of serene



rationality and because, in the last analysis, it placed the political utopia above the dignity of the individual man, showing itself even capable of arriving at contempt for man in the name of great objectives.

Political moralism, as we have lived it and are still living it, does not open the way to regeneration, and even more, also blocks it. The same is true, consequently, also for a Christianity and a theology that reduces the heart of Jesus' message, the "kingdom of God," to the "values of the kingdom," identifying these values with the great key words of political moralism, and proclaiming them, at the same time, as a synthesis of the religions.²

Though spoken now sixteen years past, these words should weigh heavy on every human heart and mind, whether believer or nonbeliever, Christian or Jew or Muslim, for his words ring objectively and morally true. Political moralism is subjective, a moralism built on the shifting sands of public opinion and political expediency, it places "political utopia above the dignity of the individual man, showing itself even capable of arriving at contempt for man in the name of great objectives." Such utopian dreams espoused by progressive politicians and the radical left are nothing more than absurd "science" fiction, waking dreams of future nightmares signifying nothing good. "Though many people believe the word 'utopia' means an ideal place, it actually means 'nowhere,' deriving from the Greek *ou* ('not') and *topos* ('place')." What it boils down to is overweening pride, the original sin of man. "Pride has a personal dimension ... But it also has a political dimension, according to which human beings can overcome the imperfections of the world and even human nature through our own efforts and ingenuity."

The defining feature is no longer sexual preference but leftism, which approaches politics from a position of pride. ... Conservatives' public virtues, such as they are, flow from their political humility; radicals' political vices stem from their penchant for pride.

Traditional society discouraged the seven deadly sins, which in addition to pride include envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. But over the past century, radicals have established an inverse standard that recognizes those sins as virtues. Astute political observers saw the change happening in real time.

In 1948, Winston Churchill described socialism as "the philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance, and the gospel of envy." He, like Whittaker Chambers, recog-

nized socialism as the alternative religion of mankind, an anti-gospel that promoted the worship of lies over truth and exalted sin over virtue. Pope Leo XIII, like many pontiffs throughout the ages, condemned socialists, whom he charged with "stealing the very Gospel itself to deceive more easily the unwary." The gospel of radical leftism—call it any name you like—trades the virtue of charity for the sin of envy.

According to the radicals' new standard, it is greedy to keep one's own property but charitable to covet and steal the possessions of another, a perfect inversion of the old standards of justice. People often confuse envy and greed, but while the Left exalts both, there is a difference. Greed is the excessive desire for acquisition; envy is pain at another's good fortune. The greedy want something for themselves; the envious merely want others not to have it.³

As Ratzinger makes clear, since the time of the Renaissance, and in a fuller sense since the Enlightenment, Europe (and the West in the main) "has developed precisely that scientific rationality which not only in the era of the discoveries led to the geographic unity of the world, to the meeting of continents and cultures, but which today, much more profoundly, thanks to the technical culture made possible by science, imprints itself on the whole world, and even more than that, in a certain sense, gives it uniformity."

And in the wake of this form of rationality, Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner unknown before now to humanity, excludes God from the public conscience, either by denying him altogether, or by judging that his existence is not demonstrable, uncertain and, therefore, belonging to the realm of subjective choices, something, in any case, irrelevant to public life.

This purely functional rationality, so to speak, has implied a disorder of the moral conscience altogether new for cultures existing up to now, as it deems rational only that which can be proved with experiments. As morality belongs to an altogether different sphere, it disappears as a category unto itself and must be identified in another way, in as much as it must be admitted, in any case, that morality is essential.

"In a world based on calculation, it is the calculation of consequences that determines what must or must not be considered moral." Here he specifically speaks of calculation as referring to science or technology. "And thus, the category of the good, as was clearly pointed out by Kant, disappears. Nothing is good or bad in itself, everything

depends on the consequences that an action allows one to foresee.”

The focus of his lecture was Europe’s crisis of culture, specifically the European Constitution. As he notes, conspicuously absent was acknowledgement of a transcendent Creator and the role of Christianity in the development of Western culture. “If Christianity, on one hand, has found its most effective form in Europe, it is necessary, on the other hand, to say that in Europe a culture has developed that constitutes the absolutely most radical contradiction not only of Christianity, but of the religious and moral traditions of humanity.”

Let us take a closer look at this opposition between the two cultures that have characterized Europe. In the debate on the Preamble of the European Constitution, this opposition was seen in two controversial points: the question of the reference to God in the Constitution and the mention of the Christian roots of Europe. Given that in article 52 of the Constitution the institutional rights of Churches are guaranteed, we can be at peace, it is said.

But this means that in the life of Europe, the Churches find a place in the realm of the political commitment, while, in the realm of the foundations of Europe, the imprint of their content has no place. The reasons that are given in the public debate for this clear “no” are superficial, and it is obvious that more than indicating the real motivation, they conceal it. The affirmation that the mention of the Christian roots of Europe injures the sentiments of many non-Christians who are in Europe, is not very convincing, given that it relates, first of all, to an historical fact that no one can seriously deny.

Naturally, this historical mention has a reference to the present. To mention the roots implies indicating as well the residual sources of moral orientation, which is a factor of Europe’s identity. Who would be offended? Whose identity is threatened?

The Muslims, who in this respect are often and willingly brought in, do not feel threatened by our Christian moral foundations, but by the cynicism of a secularized culture that denies its own foundations. Neither are our Jewish fellow citizens offended by the reference to the Christian roots of Europe, in as much as these roots go back to Mount Sinai: They bear the sign of the voice that made itself heard on the mountain of God and unite with us in the great fundamental orientations that the Decalogue has given humanity. The same is true for the reference to God: It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions, but rather

the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.

The motivations of this twofold “no” are more profound than one would think from the reasons offered. They presuppose the idea that only the radical Enlightenment culture, which has reached its full development in our time, could be constitutive for European identity. Next to this culture, then, different religious cultures can coexist with their respective rights, on the condition and to the degree in which they respect the criteria of the Enlightenment culture, and are subordinated to it.

Recognized as one of the greatest theologians, certainly since Aquinas, Ratzinger concludes that precisely because “the roots cannot enter into the definition of the foundations of Europe, ... this new identity, determined exclusively by the Enlightenment culture, also implies that God does not come in at all into public life and the foundations of the state.”

Thus everything becomes logical and also, in some sense, plausible. In fact, what could we desire as being more beautiful than knowing that everywhere democracy and human rights are respected? Nevertheless, the question must be asked, if this secular Enlightenment culture is really the culture, finally proposed as universal, that can give a common cause to all men; a culture that should have access from everywhere, even though it is on a humus that is historically and culturally differentiated. And we also ask ourselves if it is really complete in itself, to the degree that it has no need of a root outside itself.

Let us address these last two questions. To the first, that is, to the question as to whether a universally valid philosophy has been reached which is finally wholly scientifically rational, which expresses the cause common to all men, we must respond that undoubtedly we have arrived at important acquisitions which can pretend to a universal validity. These include: the acquisition that religion cannot be imposed by the state, but that it can only be accepted in freedom; respect of the fundamental rights of man equal for all; the separation of powers and control of power.

It cannot be thought, however, that these fundamental values, recognized by us as generally valid, can be realized in the same way in every historical context. Not all societies have the sociological assumptions for a democracy based on parties, as occurs in the West; therefore, the total religious neutrality of the state, in the majority of historical contexts, has to be considered an illusion.

And so we come to the problems raised by the second question. But let us clarify first if the modern Enlightenment philosophies, considered as a whole, can contain the last word of the cause common to all men. These philosophies are characterized by the fact that they are positivist and, therefore, anti-metaphysical, so much so that, in the end, God cannot have any place in them. They are based on the self-limitation of rational positivism, which can be applied in the technical realm, but which when it is generalized, entails instead a mutilation of man. It succeeds in having man no longer admit any moral claim beyond his calculations and, as we saw, the concept of freedom, which at first glance would seem to extend in an unlimited manner, in the end leads to the self-destruction of freedom.

I must pause for a moment in apology for the lengthy citation from Cardinal Ratzinger's 2005 lecture. I do so because no one could have described the reason for our current descent into madness better. Saint Anthony the Great (251-356AD), a Coptic Christian monk from Coma, Egypt is attributed to have said, "A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, 'You are mad; you are not like us.'"⁴ Chesterton, of course, said much the same of those who believe in themselves. "Shall I tell you where the men are who believe in themselves? For I can tell you. I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar. I know where flames the fixed star of certainty and success. I can guide you to the thrones of the Supermen. The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums." Upon being asked "if a man is not to believe in himself, then what is he to believe?" Chesterton replied, "I will go home and write a book to answer that question." And then he did just that, he wrote *Orthodoxy*. Thus, in recalling his moment of perspicacity, he began his book "in the neighborhood of the mad-house."

Modern masters of science are much impressed with the need of beginning all inquiry with a fact. The ancient masters of religion were quite equally impressed with that necessity. They began with the fact of sin—a fact as practical as potatoes. Whether or not man could be washed in miraculous waters, there was no doubt at any rate that he wanted washing. But certain religious leaders in London, not mere materialists, have begun in our day not to deny the highly disputable water, but to deny the indisputable dirt. Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian

theology which can really be proved. Some followers of the Reverend R. J. Campbell, in their almost too fastidious spirituality, admit divine sinlessness, which they cannot see even in their dreams. But they essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street. The strongest saints and the strongest sceptics alike took positive evil as the starting point of their argument. If it be true (as it certainly is) that a man can feel exquisite happiness in skinning a cat, then the religious philosopher can only draw one of two deductions. He must either deny the existence of God, as all atheists do; or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do. The new theologians seem to think it a highly rationalistic solution to deny the cat.

In this remarkable situation it is plainly not now possible (with any hope of a universal appeal) to start, as our fathers did, with the fact of sin. This very fact which was to them (and is to me) as plain as a pikestaff, is the very fact that has been specially diluted or denied. But though moderns deny the existence of sin, I do not think that they have yet denied the existence of a lunatic asylum. We all agree still that there is a collapse of the intellect as unmistakable as a falling house. ... I mean that as all thoughts and theories were once judged by whether they tended to make a man lose his soul, so for our present purpose all modern thoughts and theories may be judged by whether they tend to make a man lose his wits.⁵

Returning now to classroom and the lecture left ongoing, Ratzinger notes that the aforementioned Enlightenment philosophy, though containing important elements of truth, and its respective culture, is incomplete. "It consciously severs its own historical roots depriving itself of the regenerating forces from which it sprang, from that fundamental memory of humanity, so to speak, without which reason loses its orientation."

In fact, the principle is now valid, according to which, man's capacity is measured by his action. What one knows how to do, may also be done. There no longer exists a knowing how to do separated from a being able to do, because it would be against freedom, which is the absolute supreme value. But man knows how to do many things, and knows increasingly how to do more things; and if this knowing how to do does not find its measure in a moral norm, it becomes, as we can already see, a power of destruction.

The radical detachment of the Enlightenment philosophy from its roots becomes, in the last analysis, contempt for man. Man, deep down, has no freedom, we are told by the spokesmen of the natural sciences, in

total contradiction with the starting point of the whole question. Man must not think that he is something more than all other living beings and, therefore, should also be treated like them, we are told by even the most advanced spokesmen of a philosophy clearly separated from the roots of humanity's historical memory.

The real opposition that characterizes today's world is not that between various religious cultures, but that between the radical emancipation of man from God, from the roots of life, on one hand, and from the great religious cultures on the other. If there were to be a clash of cultures, it would not be because of a clash of the great religions which have always struggled against one another, but which, in the end, have also always known how to live with one another but it will be because of the clash between this radical emancipation of man and the great historical cultures.

Thus, even the rejection of the reference to God, is not the expression of a tolerance that desires to protect the non-theistic religions and the dignity of atheists and agnostics, but rather the expression of a conscience that would like to see God cancelled definitively from the public life of humanity, and relegated to the subjective realm of residual cultures of the past.

Relativism, which is the starting point of all this, thus becomes a dogmatism which believes itself to be in possession of the definitive scope of reason, and with the right to regard all the rest only as a stage of humanity, in the end surmounted, and that can be appropriately relativized. In reality, this means that we have need of roots to survive, and that we must not lose sight of God, if we do not want human dignity to disappear.

Douglas Farrow asks a question, both related to Ratzinger's lecture and because of it: By what authority⁶ does public policy respond to matters pertaining to the common good? "Public reason, one might suppose, is simply moral or practical reason exercised collectively on matters pertaining to the common good. What ought we to do about this or that, where 'this or that' is something that concerns us all?" He notes that various Western influences "have combined to give rise to a new notion of public reason, which is now something more than practical reason exercised collectively on matters pertaining to the common good. New emphasis falls on 'collectively,' on the democratization of public reason, on the will of the people. But this will is no longer informed by a common tradition, upheld by the first two estates, the noble and the clerical, as it was in Christendom. We're all commoners now, but commoners who may not have much in com-

mon. How, then, do we mediate and rule our common life?"

Liberal public reason thinks it has an answer. It stakes the claim, to quote Jonathan Quong in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, that "the moral political rules that regulate our common life [must] be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to all those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority." Which means that they cannot embody or appeal to what is not in common but only to what is in common.

So what is that? What is in common, it turns out, is that, as persons, we are all authorities to ourselves. The proponents of liberal public reason, the same author tells us, "often present the idea as an implication of a particular conception of persons as free and equal. Each of us is free in the sense of not being naturally subject to any other person's moral or political authority, and we are equally situated with respect to this freedom from the natural authority of others." Liberal public reason, in other words, acknowledges no natural authority but the authority of the self. And, we might say, of itself. For in liberal circles "public reason" doesn't even require the qualifier "liberal." Apparently, reason is a liberal invention. Who knew?

Perhaps you have noticed that the argument is circular: We have a particular conception of persons free and equal and not naturally subject to any one else's authority. This leads to a particular idea of public which entails not appealing to anything or advocating anything that might challenge our conception of persons as subject to no authority but their own.

The aforementioned Jonathan Quong concludes: "Without a shared account of the world, it might seem the project of public reason faces grave difficulties." You think?!!! "Even if certain moral or political rules can be publicly justified, our understanding and application of these rules might radically diverge given sufficient perspectival diversity regarding what the world looks like." Farrow then nails Quong's "truth" to the gender neutral, non-binary, all-inclusive lavatory door.

Public reason, and public justification of its results, does not depend on shared "values" so much as on shared perceptions of reality that call for those values and commitments. Liberal public reason is a call for reasoning of the kind that can talk about "persons" but cannot say what a person is, or is for, except to say that a person is self-determining. And it cannot even say why or how a person is self-determining because that would carry it into the realm of controversy, which its idea of "public"

is designed to exclude. Of course, it does not actually exclude it, except by suppression—suppression of those who understand persons and self-determination differently, and who therefore understand society and public reason differently. That is why the whole project of reconceiving public reason is showing itself to be impotent in the face of the culture wars.

The tip of the nail points to the power of the state “to change, to undermine, even to cripple pre-political institutions such as church and family.” Joseph Raz wrote in *The Morality of Freedom* (1988) that with regard to the family, recent changes “are uncertain and incomplete.”

Some tendencies, e.g. to communal families, or open marriages, may wither away. Others, e.g. homosexual families, may be here to stay. It is too early to have a clear view of the consequences of these developments. [today, the view is appallingly clearer] But one thing can be said with certainty. They will not be confined to adding new options to the familiar heterosexual monogamous family. They will change the character of that family. If these changes take root [sadly, they have] in our culture then the familiar marriage relations will disappear. They will not disappear suddenly. Rather they will be transformed into a somewhat different social form, which responds to the fact that it is one of several forms of bonding, and that bonding itself is much more easily and commonly dissoluble. All these factors are already working their way into the constitutive conventions which determine what is appropriate and expected within a conventional marriage and transforming its significance.

Farrow acidly concludes, “Indeed. For they are all justified by the new morality of freedom from external authority, which in turn justifies itself by reference to what it calls ‘public reason,’ which doesn’t admit of challenges. Something similar, we may safely assume, will be done with religious institutions.” The proof of this can be seen with the recent spate of church burnings—five, at latest count—in Canada, and the burning of St. John’s Church on June 1, 2019, in Washington, DC. The violent protests, the destruction of property, increase in crime, and total disregard for the rule of law are both symptomatic and symptom of the philosophical descent into madness and chaos. “Religion may or may not produce violence; nationalism may or may not produce violence. The family, for that matter, may or may not produce violence. But the need to defend ourselves from violence ought not to de-

termine that the family or the nation or the religion of family or nation should have no place in public reason. Changing the parameters of public reason is *not* the solution to the problem of violence.”

It was Hobbes, of course, who sent us down that haunted trail in *De Cive*, and it is high time we exorcised the ghost of Hobbes. The need to feed ourselves cannot justify theft or violence against those who have what we do not. Likewise, the need to defend ourselves against violence cannot justify closing the public square to discourse about improving ourselves that depends upon religion or other robust world views.

Every attempt to do so is really an attempt to maintain or achieve hegemony for some particular world view. Catholics and Protestants have tried to do this, and they should not have; neither should the proponents of liberal public reason.

Either liberal public reason is the product of cowardice respecting man’s higher end, a retreat from higher things in a desperate attempt to guard lower things, or it is an opportunistic power grab by those who don’t believe man has a higher end. Both, I’m afraid are in play. Either way, liberal public reason is destructive and tends *to* violence, not away from it. For if it is not permitted to say anything substantive about the good and about happiness, then it is also not permitted to identify and restrain moral failings. And a society that does not identify and restrain moral failings is not a society that makes men better. It is a society that encourages men to be worse.

Under the guidance of liberal public reason, we have backed ourselves into a corner, in which we are no longer able to think about moral failings in moral terms. Our now untrained moral intuitions have become just what Hume and Bentham and Nietzsche and Foucault, in their different ways, all said moral intuitions are: mere sentiments, sensations of appreciation or disgust, deployed as instruments of power; at best, aesthetic judgments, now largely untethered from a cosmos of goodness, truth, and beauty.

Moral chaos has ensued; social and legal chaos as well. Because we cannot talk of God, we cannot talk of man or of the created order in which man has been placed; that is, we cannot talk about what man is for, about the end of man, but only about what different men think they want as their own private means to happiness.

Because we cannot talk about the created order, we cannot talk about what is right but only about rights. We cannot talk objectively about dignity, only subjectively. We cannot talk about freedom except as autonomy, understood as freedom from the natural authority

of others rather than as responsible self-government.

Autonomy no longer means even what Kant thought it meant, namely, to be subject to reason. Autonomy now means that I get to decide who and what I am, and when I will cease to be what I was, or cease to be at all. You do not contribute to that, except by your acquiescence to my decision. Even God does not contribute to that. The economy of gift and givenness, on which any functioning society depends, disappears. The claims we make, and the policies and laws that we create, become untethered even from being itself, from objective reality.

To illustrate this removal of reason from the public discourse, one needs look no further than when we began pretending that the fetus was not a human being, “rendering it legal to evacuate the body of the fetus from the mother’s body even though that meant the deliberate killing of the fetus.” This evacuation of the fetus, *de facto* and *de jure*, began a general evacuation of the body itself from public reason and law. “The mother’s body still mattered and so did her ‘life project,’ but the fetus, on the grounds that it had no life project, was not even entitled to its body.”

That’s what happens, of course, when you refuse to take the Lord and Giver of life into account. If you are incapable of demonstrating that you have a life project, you simply don’t count. If, on the other hand, you affirm that your project is over, or your attempt at it is over, then you do count to this extent—in many jurisdictions you may request help in doing away with your own body. For if you are no project of God’s, you are nothing but your own project. Perhaps it won’t be long before you are nothing but *our* project, the project of public reason. Huxley saw that one coming some time ago.

Are we surprised that, some fifty years on from the legalization of abortion, the law doesn’t know what to do with the body even of the mother? The mother may now say that she is not a woman at all, that she intends to give birth, if she does give birth, as a man. Anyone may now say such things, and the law will recognize the claim as having legal force. (The media, for its part, will celebrate it as if it were a fact and not a preposterous legal fiction.) So the law ends up like the fetus: deprived of the body as its reference point, as its instrument, as its means of life.

There is nothing by which the law can now measure our claims except those claims themselves. So the law, like the mother or whomever has pushed for the abor-

tion, becomes strictly self-referential. The law, too, becomes solipsistic, having deprived itself of the body which is our God-given means of social communication and organization. The law thus becomes increasingly arbitrary and irrational. Precedent matters less and less. Fact matter less and less. *Non habeas corpus*—let us *not* have the body, not even the body of law. Everything is to be invented anew all the time, since there is no created order and no actual givens with which we and it must deal. All rights become autonomy rights and anything that inhibits autonomy is bad. Family borders, religious borders, national borders fall—nay, are torn down. Even in the Church we seem to be witnessing something analogous: a deliberate tearing down of the deposit of faith and the discipline attached to it.

Now, *Humanae vitae*, which recently reached its fiftieth birthday, tried to resist the dismantling of the law of the body which was already taking place through contraceptive dismantling of the sexual act—through the sundering of the unitive and the procreative that in the creaturely order are, in periodic fashion, synchronous—and to do that without denying, indeed by reinforcing, the link between practical reason, with its responsibility to a hierarchy of goods both public and private, and responsible procreation.

Building on that, or rather clarifying its foundations, John Paul II’s *Veritatis splendor* tried to resist the dismantling of moral reason itself: the prising apart of the body of the moral act, so to say, through the sundering of the intentionality of the act from the act’s own *obiectum* or intrinsic ordering. “The rational ordering of the human act to the good, in its truth”—the objective dimension of morality—must not be bracketed off from “the voluntary pursuit of the good,” the subjective dimension of morality, such that “discernment of conscience” comes to mean the *determination* of good and evil rather than *recognition of the distinction* between good and evil.

Had the lessons of these two encyclicals been received by more Catholics, a powerful cultural brake might have been applied against the slide into chaotic subjectivity that by 1968 was well under way. That slide, unfortunately, had already carried many Western Catholics into apostasy. They thought they were enjoying the good life and being good citizens, but in fact they were sharing in the loss of the good life and in the demise of the public sphere: loss of the good life, because the good life is the life that leads to happiness, which no life that ignores the designs of God does; loss of the public sphere, because no public sphere remains, once we have left the body behind and invested everything in the privacy of our minds.

Michael Knowles, *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds*, reminds that “Pride insists on our own perfection just the way we are. Our culture already teems with the politics of pride. Social ills seem always to stem from others—from ‘society’—never from ourselves. But the utopian Left believes we can overcome society, progressing toward and ultimately reaching perfection, if only we give the radicals just a little more time, power, and money.”

Whittaker Chambers pointed out that communism was not a novel ideology. “It is not new,” wrote Chambers. “It is, in fact, man’s second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: ‘Ye shall be as gods.’” Chambers called communism “the great alternative faith of mankind ... the vision of Man without God.” It comes as no surprise, then, that adherents of that alternative faith should make pride, the original sin of mankind, their paramount virtue.

Earlier, in the chapter “*Campus Codes and Coercion*,” Knowles contends Political Correctness was born and allowed to thoroughly debauch the university, descending into accusations of racism, sexism, white supremacy, *ad nauseam*. “Contrary to popular propaganda, not only did the West not invent ‘racism’ and ‘sexism,’ but it has uniquely eschewed both. Unlike closed and tribal cultures everywhere else on earth, Western civilization has welcomed and integrated new peoples to enjoy and contribute to its superior cultural achievements.” He cites the philosopher Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) who tracked the decay of the modern university even subtitling his book, *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*.

Bloom saw in the new campus culture the central paradox of political correctness: the pursuit of “openness” had closed people’s minds. “Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger,” Bloom wrote. Whereas in the past American education had aimed at excellence, scholarship, and the cultivation of the knowledge and virtues necessary to liberty—that is, the liberal arts—by the mid-to-late-twentieth century it valued “openness” above all else.

Allan Bloom understood the radicals to believe that “the study of history and of culture teaches that all the

world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism.” We must therefore liberate ourselves, not only from false opinion, but from opinion itself. As Bloom saw it, the reformers’ “point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.” The American mind had become so open that its brain had fallen out.

The radicals did indeed want to “open” the curriculum, but only to close it again on terms more favorable to their political ends. Just as with “free speech” and “tolerance,” perfect openness cannot exist. Boundaries must constrain free speech if only to protect speech, as in the case of laws against sedition or rules against the heckler’s veto. Tolerance cannot tolerate intolerance. And openness cannot leave itself open to closed-mindedness. In Bloom’s words, the education of openness “is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything.” But no man really can be open to everything—least of all the reformers. Education requires judgment, and popularity contests do not determine truth. Pedagogy is neither an open nor a democratic process.

Radical openness collapses into the claim that no meaning exists at all, and therefore it excludes the possibility that any meaning exists.

“When there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible?” Bloom asked. But the radicals do share a goal: the ruthless criticism of all that exists. They lack a vision of the public good, but they have a clear sense of the public evil. Oppressive tradition impedes progress, so to open itself to the future, society must close itself off from its past.

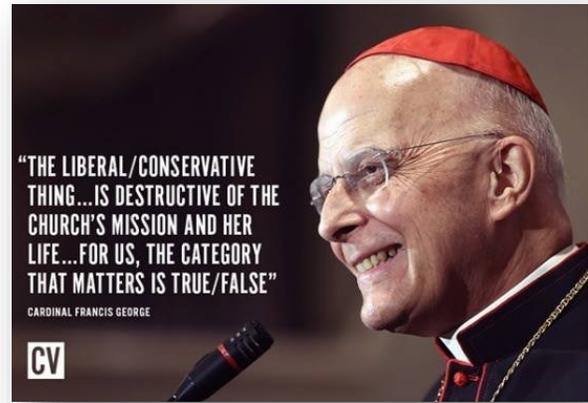
Political correctness advances by redefinition. Americans cherish free speech, tolerance, open minds, and liberty. Rather than turn people against those values, the radicals turned the concepts inside out. They launched a “Free Speech Movement” to overturn traditional standards by appealing to the nation’s reverence for free speech, after which they inaugurated a new era of censorship to enforce their new standards. They preached tolerance until their ideas had entered the public discourse, at which point they demanded repression for their ideological foes. They demanded educators open curricula to new, resentful theories of race, sex, and citizenship, at which point they closed the American mind to its own culture. All of these perversions and inversions took place at the university, our secular culture’s intellectual and spiritual center. So it comes as no surprise that the university’s mission also came to be redefined.

Liberal education long predates modern liberalism and even classical liberalism. It traces its roots to ancient Greece, where it cultivated its citizens the habits, knowledge, and skills that befit free men. In medieval Europe, university students studied grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. These seven subjects did not train pupils for any particular jobs. The liberal arts served a loftier goal: the liberal arts trained men to be free.

The Marxist concept of “false consciousness,” ... may have proven perverse in practice, but it began with a true principle: men must be forced to be free. We come into this world helpless slaves to our appetites. If we persist in thoughtless pursuit of our lusts and desires, we descend into licentiousness; if we educate ourselves and tame our appetites through training in virtue, we attain liberty. A free politics requires free people. But free people reject the radicals’ politics. So the radicals redefined liberal education.⁷

I will conclude where Chesterton began, “in the neighborhood of the mad-house.” As I have given title to this essay “*Walking Through Solid Walls and Other Absurd Social ‘Science’ Fictions*” I will leave you with a novel thought. We are assuredly in the neighborhood of the mad house. Whether inside or outside, resident or observer, I believe, is yet unknown, too soon to tell. Likewise, how long this public madness roils remains an open question. Only time will tell the tale; only God knows its ending. Pray it ends well and soon.

1. J. Douglas Johnson, “*Braking Badly*”, Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity, July/August 2021, 15-17.
2. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), from a lecture given in the convent of Saint Scholastica in Subiaco, Italy, 2005.
3. Michael Knowles, *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2021), 150-52.
4. Interestingly, Saint Anthony is often appealed to for protection against infectious diseases.
5. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 6-8.
6. Douglas Farrow, “*By What Authority?*”, Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity, July/August 2021, 33-37.
7. Michael Knowles, *Speechless: Controlling Words*, 112-15.



“Abolish slavery tomorrow, and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered. It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim, of property in man.

“If in its origin slavery had any relation to the government, it was only as the scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed.”

- Frederick Douglass



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Lincoln on mob law

“The innocent, those who have ever set their faces against violations of law in every shape, alike with the guilty, fall victims to the ravages of mob law. And thus it goes on, step by step, till all the walls erected for the defense of the persons and property, are trodden down, and disregarded.

“By instances of the perpetrators of such acts going unpunished, the lawless in spirit are encouraged to become lawless in practice; and having been used to no restraint, they thus become absolutely unrestrained.”

- Abraham Lincoln



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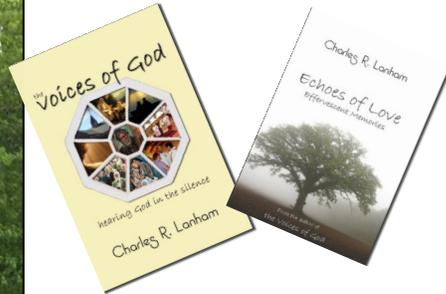
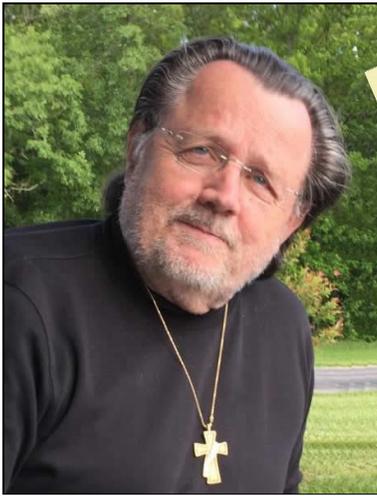
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Deacon Chuck Lanham is a Catholic author, columnist, speaker, theologian and philosopher, a jack-of-all-trades like his father (though far from a master of anything) and a servant of God. He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and has written over 500 essays on religion, faith, morality, theology, and philosophy.

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"WE MUST NEVER FORGET THAT THE WORD OF GOD TRANSCENDS TIME. HUMAN OPINIONS COME AND GO. WHAT IS VERY MODERN TODAY WILL BE VERY ANTIQUATED TOMORROW. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF ETERNAL LIFE, IT BEARS WITHIN IT ETERNITY AND IS VALID FOREVER."

POPE BENEDICT XVI



"THE WORLD OFFERS YOU COMFORT, BUT YOU WERE NOT MADE FOR COMFORT. YOU WERE MADE FOR GREATNESS."

- Pope Benedict XVI



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