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The Perennial Thirty Years' War

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The Perennial Thirty Years' War

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My task in this paper is to alert the reader to a culture war that is raging among us right here in Europe. This is not a war between religious fundamentalism and Enlightenment, nor between nationalism and global solidarity. It is a war we can think of, in Kierkegaardian terms, as the conflict between an aesthetic and a moral approach to life. But for the now I would like to present it in more concrete, historical terms, as the clash between the spirits of two cultural movements or institutions that have coexisted in Europe for five hundred years, not always peacefully. What Kierkegaard called 'the aesthetic', I see embodied in Catholicism; and what he called 'the moral' (or 'ethical'), I understand as the spirit of Protestantism. I believe that what I call the Protestant spirit began to grow strong and spread in Europe as a result of the Reformation, but I will suggest rather than prove this historical claim. Most of my efforts will be philosophical, characterizing the two spirits and their manifestations.

In what follows, I will offer some characteristic examples from contemporary life of this conflict. I will show how Catholicism, or the 'aesthetic' spirit, is under attack in our society by Protestantism, or the 'moral' or 'moralistic' spirit. I will take issue with this attack, suggesting that the aesthetic Catholic spirit is one of life-affirmation, a force of good; whereas the Protestant or moral spirit is a force of life-denial. Here I diverge from Kierkegaard, who placed morality

higher than aesthetics on the hierarchy of values. On my side, however, I have Nietzsche, who wrote that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*."¹ I believe I also have on my side the common man, who for the most part lives his lives aesthetically, even as the philosophers of his society provide no theoretical justification for this way of life. Finally, I have many artists and writers on my side, and I will refer in my conclusion to one work of fiction in particular to illustrate the Catholic view of life.

1. The Catholic Spirit and the Protestant Spirit

Given the connection I posit between the two spirits or cultures and the two strands of Christianity, it might be natural to begin by consulting various textual sources in Catholic and Protestant theology and then proceed to compare and contrast their doctrines. But that would actually be presumptuous. For one of the major differences between these two branches of Christianity concerns the roles that doctrine, theory and text play in them. Consider how Protestantism advocates for 'faith alone' — for redemption through *belief* rather than through good works. Protestantism regards the Bible as the sole authority; and it calls on Christians to read the Bible for themselves, in the privacy of their homes, rather than attending Church, where the priest's interpretation of a few Biblical passages will be just one ingredient of the religious service.

To get a sense of the spirit of the Catholic church, it will not suffice to consider Saint Thomas' proofs for God's existence, nor to consult any other written work, such as Papal Encyclicals. We should instead seize upon the images and practices that are at the center of Catholicism. Now I want to say that the most

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufman (New York: Modern Library, 1992), section 5, p. 52, italics in the original

prominent image in Catholicism is the Madonna and child, an image that you see everywhere in Catholic countries: as cast sculptures looking down at passers-by from the corners of houses, as roadside shrines in the country, as wooden icons hanging over countless desks, beds and kitchen tables. What does this phenomenon tell us about Catholicism? First, it is an example of how the Catholic most often encounters the divine or religion through *images*, or by the mediation of some other aesthetic object or experience. Mass is indeed a ceremony that appeals to all our senses. We *see* murals of the saints and *hear* the priests' chanting; we shake our neighbor's hand; smell the incense and candles and taste the Eucharist. Secondly, Madonnas and other ubiquitous icons do not proclaim any kind of thesis. Rather they convey an attitude and evoke a mood. The Holy Mother of God often looks straight at us in these pictures, with a grave or solemn expression in her face as she holds her precious child who will be taken from her prematurely. With minimal emotional cues, these images manage to convey the mother's grief and love. Thirdly, these images invite us to engage in a ritual: to *cross ourselves* before them, or to *kneel* and *pray*. Catholic worship, I want to say, is first of all experiential and practical, not reflective and theoretical. Finally, the central image of Catholicism features not the extraordinary terror and sacrifice represented by the crucifix, but rather the divine in the midst of the most ordinary and familiar: a mother holding her baby in her lap, a scene in which we can all imagine ourselves. This woman is neither Goddess nor half-Goddess, but a human being. It is her perfectly mundane body, her mundane care, that has borne and keeps nourishing and protecting the heavenly child.

A passage from Kierkegaard's discussion of tragedy comes to mind. Tragedy for Kierkegaard represents the aesthetic approach to life—it is how aesthetes deal with suffering. "The tragic," he writes, "contains something infinitely gentle, in human life it is actually an aesthetic analogue to divine grace and

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mercy, softer than they even, and therefore I want to say that it is a motherly love which lulls the troubled one." The moral view of life, on the other hand, "is stern and hard," he says.² It introduces the concepts of duty, guilt and responsibility as solutions to suffering whereas the aesthetic offers comfort to victims and forgiveness to perpetrators.

Protestantism emerged partly as a rejection of these aesthetic, ceremonial and sentimental aspects of Catholicism. Luther considered bells and church ornaments harmless but useless.³ And while early on he defended the educational value of images depicting Biblical stories, he later wrote that it would be better to display no such pictures, as they invite idolatry.⁴ Calvin was more staunch in his opposition to religious imagery, which he thought breached both the First and the Second Commandments.⁵ The only subjects appropriate for depiction, he wrote, are those that also in reality are visible to us.⁶ Furthermore he largely rejected the sacraments, retaining only baptism and communion; and as for communion, he insisted that the bread and wine are mere symbols. They are not actually transubstantiated into flesh and blood by the priest's blessing at the altar. The wine is still wine, the bread still bread. We do commune with the divine at communion, but not in virtue of eating and drinking the bread and the wine. Rather, he posited that the Spirit of the Lord is present during the sacrament.⁷ Nonetheless, the theologies of both Luther and Calvin make a sharper distinction than does Catholicism between soul and body, heaven and earth, sacred and mundane; and with these divisions, the

² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* Part I, trans. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 145 (translation amended)

³ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. by T. F. Lull and W. R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 78

⁴ Luther, p. 78; 511f.

⁵ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 29

⁶ Parker, p. 30, referring to Calvin xi.12.

⁷ Parker, p. 157, refers to Calvin xvii.10

idea that art can be revelation, that sensuous and aesthetic experiences can have religious significance is lost. The result is a much more *abstract* and *cerebral* Christianity. God is the object of an intellectual faith and a reverence displayed through asceticism and self-discipline. It certainly has a practical dimension, but a theory precedes this practice.

What is 'moral' or 'moralistic' in Protestantism can be gleaned from its critique of Catholicism. Specifically, in questioning the authority of the Pope and clergy, Protestantism trusts every man to be able to interpret Scripture for himself, and more generally to be able to think and judge for himself. Basic modern moral values of individual autonomy and equality among men is evident here. The preoccupation with truth and falsehood and the search for an *authentic* faith, are also essentially moral, insofar as they are attempts to avoid deception. The Protestant rejection of aesthetics derives from its suspicion of natural human inclinations, like our love of beauty; as well as of aesthetic experiences orchestrated by men. These are especially vicious if they move participants to great passions and moods, since at best such experiences are mere bodily happenings that do not put us in touch with anything spiritual; at worst, they are temptations from the devil.

Max Weber notes this as part of elaborating on the ascetic element in Protestantism.⁸ Not only, he writes, is Protestantism opposed to art posing as religion; but Calvin and especially the Puritan movement was from the start suspicious of art more generally.⁹ What Weber regards as the bearing pillars of Protestantism—self-reflection, self-discipline and work—together serve to turn the individual away from frivolous pleasures in the outside world, such as the

⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, trans. G. C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 78

⁹ Weber, p. 113

theater. It does so partly by directing his attention to his own spiritual condition, partly by training him to resist temptation and pleasure, and finally by offering him, in the form of a job, a distraction from desire.¹⁰ But now, let me turn to a consideration of the Thirty Years' War in our time.

2. The Thirty Years' War Today

If we want to get a sense of how the Catholic and Protestant spirits clash in modern times, we must first look at the contemporary attitude to aesthetics. You will have heard the laments of how we supposedly live in the age of the cult of beauty, a superficial age in which appearances are all that matter. But from my perspective, this way of objecting to beauty, the reflexive suspicion of appearances as *mere* appearances, is symptomatic of a cultural sickness. Exhibit Number One originally comes from the United States — the country that started out as a refuge for Protestants; it is the Pepsi Challenge. This was a campaign by Pepsi that challenged people to take a blind test of Pepsi Cola and Coca-Cola. Pepsi was betting that when presented only with the bare *flavor* of Pepsi, consumers would prefer that beverage to Coke, showing that Coca-Cola enjoyed its great success thanks only to its PR, which had somehow managed to sell people on an illusion. Now what interests us is the view of sensory and aesthetic experience presupposed by this campaign. Most obviously, a beverage is meant to appeal to the sense of taste. The campaign implicitly opposes any influence on this gustatory experience from other senses or background knowledge. Having a drink, by this logic, is at best a bodily pleasure.

Most of the time, however, experience is not as simple as this. First of all, perceptual experience forms a complex whole, with input from all our senses

¹⁰ Weber, e.g. pp. 80-83, though this argument is developed over the course of the whole book.

mixing and conditioning each other. As Sartre put it, the yellow of a lemon is sour. Moreover, other, non-sensory factors influence perceptual experience as well. You can enjoy the smell of truffle oil if it comes to you from a plate of pasta with truffle sauce, even though by itself it smells much like car fuel, which is not something you find appetizing. The impact on experience of the way in which it is framed for us—the way we conceptualize its object, and what associations are triggered in us—is enormous. Now setting aside the question whether as a bare flavor, Coke tastes better than Pepsi, it is clear that Coca-Cola triggers different associations than Pepsi does. Coke has an aura of coolness, and coolness is an aesthetic concept or experience. In its campaign, Pepsi implied that Coke’s coolness is an illusion. Not by proving Coke not to be cool, but by undercutting the reality or value of aesthetic experience as such. Though Protestant asceticism rejects frivolous bodily pleasures like that of drinking unhealthy sugary drinks, its dismissal of the religious experience produced by bells, candles and incense is the same denial of aesthetics as the one we find in the Pepsi campaign. And this rejection of aesthetics is really an impoverishment of experience, an impoverishment of our relation to the world.

Due to research on implicit biases, the general wariness about the framing of experience has been heightened since the days of the Pepsi challenge, and the idea that if drinking Coke rather than Pepsi makes you feel cool, then you are the advertiser’s fool, is an idea that persists stubbornly, nagging us. Most of us have internalized the idea that advertising is something bad, an infringement on our autonomy. But actually, we have a great deal to be thankful for to the institution of advertising. In exchange for paying a little more for a product, advertising helps us take a greater enjoyment in that product by framing our experience, injecting it with a certain vibe, a certain mood; giving it a certain meaning. Thanks to advertising, something as banal as drinking sugared

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carbonated water can be elevated to a rush, making you feel a little bit better about yourself, about your day.

Now let us consider a type of conflict of which Europe has seen many examples in the last couple of decades. Usually, these are presented as clashes between tradition or religion on the one hand and Enlightenment liberalism on the other. I am thinking of the proposal in Germany and elsewhere to ban circumcision of newborn boys, and the restrictions on headscarves in France. Let France and its headscarves be Exhibit Number Two.

France is of course a predominantly Catholic country, though its Catholic population is much more secular than that of Italy or Poland. It also prides itself on a far-reaching law separating state and religion. Upon a review of this law in 2003, its application to the display of religious symbols by students and teachers in public schools was clarified. Now a distinction was made between so-called "discrete" religious symbols, which were to be allowed, and so-called "conspicuous" ones, which could not be worn in public schools. A small pendant in the form of a cross or Star of David counted as "discrete," whereas large crosses, skullcaps and headscarves were to be considered "conspicuous."¹¹

The French ideal of a separation between church and state is usually said to date back to the French Revolution and, more generally, to be an Enlightenment idea.¹² But actually, the idea dates back to the Reformation. Calvin, a Frenchman, insisted that a civil government and a religious government (in other words, the Church) could and must coexist harmoniously.

¹¹ 'La laïcité et l'école' in La Documentation française, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/d000095-laicite-les-debats-100-ans-apres-la-loi-de-1905/la-laicite-et-l-ecole>, accessed 13 September 2017.

¹² 'Histoire de la laïcité en France' in *Wikipedia*, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histoire_de_la_laïcité_en_France.

The two types of government are distinguished from another by their different jurisdictions. The Church is concerned with our eternal souls; civil government, meanwhile, presides over all that concerns man as a finite, earthly creature.¹³ Relatedly, religious toleration was first widely instituted in Europe through the Peace Treaty of Westphalia, which marked the defeat of the Roman Empire's attempt to subjugate Protestant territories and force Catholicism on their populations.¹⁴ Now on one way of interpreting this, the Protestant struggle for religious toleration and freedom, and the separation of Church and state, was not so much the struggle for a universal principle as the use of a principle to safeguard Protestants' ability to practice their own alternative version of Christianity without fear of persecution. Yet there are reasons to think that a separation between Church and state was not just a pragmatic aspiration on the part of the Protestants, but a principle rooted deep in their religion, and flowing organically from their notion of religiosity as something *inner*, something between the individual and God, invisible to others. In fact, this Protestant view of religion yields a separation between religion and *culture*—a view on which religion is not part of culture and its expressions are not cultural expressions. This non-cultural idea of religion, probably more than the ideal of separating religious and civil authorities, seems to me to be at work in the French law on secularism in public schools, particularly in its understanding of what constitutes a conspicuous religious symbol. A Muslim headscarf has a religious meaning, to be sure. According to one theory, it symbolizes a partition in the Prophet Mohammad's house behind which his wives were hidden from visitors' view, so as to remain inviolate by the gazes of other men. To wear a headscarf is then to represent oneself as a bride of the Prophet, or more

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pp. 899-900 and more generally Ch. 20

¹⁴ 'Peace of Westphalia' in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Peace-of-Westphalia>, accessed 5 September 2017

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generally, to adopt that same protection against the gazes of strangers that was afforded the Prophet's wives.

Of course, there is a particular notion of womanhood, female sexuality and how it differs from male sexuality, built into this practice of concealment. Even if these notions of female and male, feminine and masculine, can be anchored in a religious doctrine or mythology, they are also cultural. The idea that the female body is sacred and ought to be revered and enjoy special protection is found in many cultures and has a social meaning and social function, quite aside from whether or not it is also connected to a religious myth or divine commandment. We might call the headscarf a 'thick' symbol, contrasting it with 'thin' symbols like a cross worn on a necklace. Unlike such a cross, the headscarf is not only a sign, but part of a way of life, a cultural and social self-conception. By covering her hair, a woman frames herself in a particular way to others, and also to herself. Furthermore it is a piece of clothing, perhaps an accessory, that can serve an aesthetic function, as adornment. This intermingling of religious, social and cultural meaning is relatively alien to Protestantism. But it pervades Islam, Judaism, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, and to categorize a headscarf exclusively as a religious symbol is to ignore cultural meaning in a characteristically Protestant way. On the most generous interpretation, the French law betrays a flatfooted ignorance about what culture is. On a more damning one, it amounts to cultural nihilism: a denial that culture is real or valuable.

Exhibit Number Three concerns the prevalent contemporary argument to the effect that we buy too much stuff and fetishize material possessions. This tendency in our society gets labeled variously 'consumerism' and 'materialism', and under these headings gets lumped together with our readiness to throw things away once they've outlived their usefulness, regarding material objects in a purely utilitarian way. Of course, throwing things away is connected to

buying things in that we need to first acquire material possessions in order to be able to put them in the garbage. There is indeed a mindset, an attitude to material things, that manifests itself equally in the ease with which we purchase new stuff and the ease with which we throw them away. And 'consumerism' seems like an appropriate label for this mindset. It reflects a lack of reverence for material things, due perhaps to a lack of reverence for nature. It seems to view the material world instrumentally, as a resource to be exploited for our ends. This is how Weber's analyzes the Protestant view of matter in his discussion of the difference between Protestant and Catholic approaches to *production*. According to Weber, manufacturers in Germany noted with frustration how their Catholic employees were unable to adopt new methods of crafting objects, ways of handling the material that differed from the ones they were used to. Assuring them that the new methods were more efficient and less straining on the worker's body did not faze them. Their craftsmanship, I want to suggest, was based on a more intimate relation with their materials, ingrained in the movements of their hands, and tied up with their sense of the material's essence, and the meaning of the thing to be forged out of it. To change their craftsmanship, they would have had to disregard this meaning of the object, its identity, and look more abstractly at their materials and the work process, regarding them as just means to some external end, rather than as a sort of ongoing relationship with an inherent value.

Now if we consider not the production but the acquisition and keeping of such material objects, we can construe a concomitant Catholic attitude to the acquisition and keeping of material objects. Like the Catholic approach to manufacturing, it is not utilitarian. And its corollary is not the ability to throw things away lightheartedly. It leads rather to a tendency to fetishize material things; that is, to revere them and regard them as imbued with meaning, even treating them anthropomorphically as unique individuals that cannot be

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replaced, with whom we have personal relationships, and that testify to our past experiences with them as well as the lives we envision living among them in the future.

In his essay "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin describes his affection for his books, and proclaims that for a collector, "ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to an object."¹⁵ This fetishism may have dire environmental consequences when multiplied on a large scale, but as a character trait, it is not subject to the same criticism as the attitude behind the behavior for which I think we ought to reserve the label 'consumerism'. Yet in the critique of this fetishism or reverence, we hear the echo of the Protestant rejection of attachment to material things and sensuous enjoyment—the idea that matter may be exploited for our needs but cannot be worshipped. The asceticism that Catholicism requires only of those who have chosen monastic life, Protestantism generalizes as the lifestyle ideal for everyone. In the accusation, for example, that the booming interest in interior decoration, fashion, and food is a symptom of our superficiality and frivolity, we hear again the Protestant founders' rejection not only of sensuous indulgence, but also their insistence that candles and bells are redundant for mass, that art cannot reveal the divine, and that the Eucharist is not *really* the body of Christ.

The result of this sharp separation between spirit and matter is really a profound alienation of people from earthly existence, a shattering of any hope that the material world can be a home for us in some profound way. And conversely, the prevalence of religious art in Catholicism, the care with which churches are decorated and the effort made during religious services to induce a certain mood in the participants—these aspects of Catholicism amount to an

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" in his *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), p. 67

encouragement of our natural inclination to find meaning in material objects and sensuous experiences, to see spirit and flesh as united. Ultimately, they serve to reconcile us to earthly existence, to feel at home in the world. This deep spiritual comfort is what is lost when Protestantism dispels what Benjamin called the aura that previously surrounded not only the kinds of magical objects used in rituals—such as relics, icons, and the Eucharist—but also photographs and works of art;¹⁶ when it insists that wine is just wine, bread is just bread. The result is, as Nietzsche would later put it, that “A stone is *more* of a stone now.”¹⁷

3. The Brute Good

The Protestant mindset as I have characterized it is essentially *reflective*. It does not leave things be as they are, is not satisfied with immediate impressions of things but *inquires* into things. This takes place as part of a *pursuit of justification*, an attempt to establish true and false, right and wrong. Kierkegaard regarded autonomous reflection, and the search for the true and the right through reflection, as Socrates’ contribution to human culture. If this belief in every individual’s ability to find truth through reflection lay in hibernation during the Middle Ages, I want to suggest that it was awoken not only by Descartes, but equally by Luther and Calvin. If Socrates was ‘the founder of morality’, I want to say that Luther and Calvin founded modern moralism.

What is wrong with moralism, with the emphasis on reflection and justification in ethical life, is that the things that give meaning to life, that offer a bit of redemption in *this* life, are not always easy to justify. When something strikes us as good, it often does so in a brute way. That is why the part of ethical life

¹⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in his *Illuminations*.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, #218, emphasis added

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that is concerned not with rights and obligations, but with ends—with the Good—is better treated in literature than in philosophy. When we feel great joy or awe or love or meaning—*aesthetic experiences*, by Kierkegaard's lights, but with an ethical and spiritual depth he sometimes denied—we can express ourselves only in a kind of pidgin. We *name* the things that enchant us, we *point* to them, but to explain *why* we should be so enchanted, to extract the good from them in terms of concepts—this is far more difficult. Virginia Woolf captures this inarticulateness of our encounter with the Good in her narration of Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts and experiences as she goes out to buy flowers: "in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment in June."¹⁸

By reducing aesthetic experience to pleasure, and rejecting pleasure as something trite and primitive; by purging religion of aesthetic and affective elements; and finally by separating religion from culture, Protestantism has done a disservice both to religion and to culture. For not only do we end up with an exceedingly formal, ethereal and prosaic religion; but by being denied any real connection to the sacred, aesthetic or 'hedonistic' values have come to be thought of as trite and vulgar. And yet in our naïve, immediate experience of the world, there are moments of enchantment that blur any distinction between secular and religious. It should not occur to us to accuse Clarissa Dalloway of either blasphemy or romantic hyperbole when we hear her imagine the answer she ought to give when asked why she's always giving these parties—to bask in her own social status? She cannot hope that her answer will be understood, Woolf writes; and yet it is the only answer she can give: "They're an offering."¹⁹

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 2

¹⁹ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 107

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